Judgment & Ingenuity

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Close your eyes. Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths and see how it feels. Does it feel energizing or does it feel tiring? If it feels good, keep going. If not, you can change. Experiment with the breath. Think of the breath not just as air coming in and out of the lungs, but as the whole movement of energy through the body. As the breath comes in, the breath goes out. In some parts of the body it’s very obvious, and in others it’s more subtle. Focus on a part of the body where it’s not so obvious. See what rhythm and texture of breathing feels good. It’s entirely up to you to judge what feels good right now. This is one of the purposes of the meditation, to develop your powers of judgment. Then you have to balance two things. One is how the breathing feels right now. And then if you stick with a particular kind of breathing, how does it affect the body over time? If you find that it feels good for a while, then after a while it doesn’t feel so good. Well, you can change. Try to keep on top of what the body needs right now, whether it needs to be calmed down, whether it needs to be energized. You can also experiment with where you focus your attention. It’s good to stick in the beginning, right in that central meridian. Think of a line going right down the middle of the body. Try to keep your attention focused there. And think this as a practice. It’s a process of exploration. You’re learning about the breath, you’re learning about the mind. You’re not trying to force it into a particular mold. You are aiming at concentration. But the way your mind is going to settle down is a very individual matter. Some people like to use the meditation word along with the breath. Other people don’t like to use that word. They’d rather have the breath on its own. Some people like to count the breaths. If you do count the breaths, don’t go beyond ten. Otherwise it turns into a counting exercise. Start one through ten, and then one through ten again, until you find that it’s easy to stay with the breath. And then you can drop the counting, drop the meditation word, so you can be more sensitive to how the breathing feels. You’re trying to get a sense of what works. If things don’t seem to be working well, ask yourself, “What could you do differently?” You can work either with where you focus, how hard you focus. Sometimes there’s too much pressure put on the focal point, so you have to back off a bit. Sometimes the pressure is not enough and you find yourself floating around. Then experiment with the breath. Experiment with how you think of the breath. Try to think of the breath in a way that makes it easy to breathe in. If you think of the breath as something you have to struggle and fight to breathe in, you’re going to have to struggle and fight to bring it in. The perception often will have an effect on what actually happens in the body. You might want to think of the body as being open in all directions. Every little pore can soak in the breath energy and let it out. And all the channels of energy in the body work together. Think in that way. See what it does. This is how you develop your powers of judgment. You notice what you’re doing, and then you notice the results you get. This is how discernment gets developed. You learn to see distinctions. All too often we think of Buddhism in terms of buzzwords or soundbites. Things get boiled down to one principle, say, mindfulness or compassion or emptiness, acceptance or non-reactivity. And all these things are good things, but they have to have their time and place. There was a deva that went to see the Buddha and asked him about how he should practice. The Buddha goes down a long list of things. He says, for example, there’s equanimity. There’s the equanimity that should be pursued and the equanimity that should not be pursued. And how do you know which is which? Well, certain kinds of equanimity, if you pursue them, unskillful states arise in the mind. Don’t pursue that equanimity. The types of equanimity that you pursue give rise to skillful states. That’s the kind you should pursue. In other words, it’s up to you to notice. There’s a similar principle around patience. You learn to be patient and tolerant and endure painful feelings and hurtful words from other people. You learn to be content with whatever physical requisites you get. But you should not be patient with unskillful states in the mind. You should figure out some way not to be overcome by them. You shouldn’t be content with whatever skillful states you do attain. As long as there’s still some suffering and stress in the mind, you know there’s more to be done. So you have to learn how to make these distinctions, and you have to be willing to experiment in order to learn. Meditation, even though it has instructions, there’s no general pointers. You have to apply them to see how they work for you. It’s not a matter of just applying the directions without thinking. You have to use your powers of observation and your ingenuity. The word ingenuity, patiphana, is an interesting one. The Buddha talks about it as one of the qualities you need to know about yourself. There are six altogether you need to know. You need to know your level of conviction, you need to know your generosity, you need to know your virtue, you need to know your discernment, you need to know how much you know in terms of the Buddha’s teachings, and you need to know your ingenuity, your ability to apply these things at the right time in the right place. It’s not just a matter of obeying instructions. You have to observe as well. This is what adds nuance to the teaching. For example, the Buddha said that in terms of things that he would say, they would have to be true and beneficial and timely. He’d ask those questions in that order. First, check, “Is this true?” Secondly, “Is this beneficial?” Third, “Is this the right time and place?” That question of being timely, that’s something you have to learn through observation. The same principle applies to your thoughts. There are things that are true and, in general, they may be beneficial, but this may or may not be the right time to think them. So right now, the thoughts you want are the ones that help keep you focused on the breath, keep you interested in the breath. Breathe in a way that gives rise to pleasure, a sense of ease, well-being, fullness in the body, to help the mind settle down. So this means you do have to do some thinking. You’re not trying to squeeze off your thoughts or beat down the mind. Thinking has its place, too. Fabrication has its place. As you’re thinking about the breath and evaluating the breath, that’s skillful fabrication. Any questions you ask yourself about the breath that help keep you interested in the breath, that’s skillful fabrication, too. And as far as this time and place is concerned, any thoughts that pull you away, those are thoughts you don’t want to get involved with, just drop them. Let them go. The mind needs to rest. It needs to have a sense of its center, as its normal place to be. Because when the mind is well-centered, it gains energy. It’s healing for the mind. And as the mind gets more centered and still, it’s able to see things and judge them more clearly as to what’s timely, what’s not, what’s beneficial and what’s not. And this ability to judge, this is what helps to develop our discernment. Because when the time does come to think about other things, that’s precisely what you need to know, is judging what kind of thoughts really are good thoughts, useful thoughts, timely thoughts. When is patience beneficial and when is it not? When is equanimity beneficial and when is it not? There’s a story that Ajahn Chah tells, and it’s interesting that he tells us, because sometimes you hear that Ajahn Chah was all about let go, let go, let go. There was once, when he was invited into the palace, the king was facing some political issues. There were demonstrations in the streets, and several other forest ajahns went along. So the king asked them what he should do about the situation. And two of the other ajahns said, “Well, you should develop some equanimity and just kind of let it go.” Ajahn Chah was number three in seniority. So by the time the king got to him, Ajahn Chah gave him a look and he said, “Well, you have to use your discernment in letting go, in being equanimous.” What to let go, what not to let go. And how are you going to know? This is what comes from learning how to look at your actions and learning how to evaluate them. This is where thinking is useful. This is how you develop your ingenuity, how you develop your ability to improvise, to figure out what’s appropriate for right here, right now. And if you’re not really sure, Ajahn Lee has a good recommendation for any ideas that come up in your mind. And you wonder, “Is this a useful idea or is this not a useful idea?” And you would say, “Well, turn it around. What about the opposite? To what extent is that true? To what extent is that useful?” Test things out in this way in your mind. Say, for instance, you’ve been noticing that there’s some blockage in the breath energy in the left side of your body, so you focus on the left side. And for some reason it seems to get worse. Well, think about the opposite. How about focusing on the right side? Because sometimes there’s an overcompensation, and the real problem is not where you notice the pain, but it’s on the opposite side of the body. This is a physical example. But the same principle applies to ideas as well. Whatever idea you think of, think of the opposite. Compare them. And that way your discernment develops nuance. It’s not just soundbite discernment or buzzword discernment. It’s the discernment that comes from being really observant. From mastering cause and effect. This is one of the reasons why we have meditation instructions. They give you an idea of something to do, and you try it out. And if your original understanding of the instructions doesn’t work, well, see what you can do to play with it. John Furon told of a time when he was starting out to meditate, and he was told to bring his mind down. So he went down, down, down, down, down. Then as he focused down, down, down, it just got heavier and heavier and heavier. And finally he realized this could not be what they meant. So he said, “How about bringing it up?” So he went up, up, up, up, up. Then he was able to find the balance point, where the mind felt just right, not too heavy, not too light. That’s when he also realized he hadn’t understood what was meant by bringing the mind down. There’s always the potential for some misunderstanding in the meditation instructions. Because when we talk about the mind, we’re often talking in analogies. We’re talking about something that’s very personal, your own experience of your mind in your breath, not things that you can bring out and chart out for someone else to see. But you take the instructions and you give them a try. And then you play with them until you find what works. This is how your discernment gets developed. This is how you come to understand.

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