A Sense of Just Right

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Because with any skill, the tricky part of meditation is to get a sense of just right, to get a feel for the practice. How hard to push things. Because sometimes the mind responds. You push it and push it and push it, and things get better. Other times it rebels, which means you have to step back and watch for a while. As the Buddha says, there are two types of problems in the mind. Some problems go away when you just watch them with equanimity. In other words, they exist as problems because they’re hidden from you. But if you watch them carefully for a while, you see them, and you see right through them. You understand where this comes from, why you don’t want to get involved, and it just falls away. There is that kind of problem. And then there are the other problems that go away only when you fight them. And as with fighting any enemy, first you have to understand your enemy. Which means, again, you have to do some watching. You can’t just go in with your ideas of what you want out of the situation and force it that way. Because the mind is complex. So you watch it, and then you experiment. See what works and see what doesn’t work. The Buddha talks about exerting a fabrication. That’s his way of expressing the idea of putting an effort into the practice. And there are different ways that we fabricate our experience. The way we breathe is one way of fabricating our experience. That’s one way you can test things. What happens if you breathe in a different way? And then there’s the way you direct your thoughts and actions. And you can evaluate things, the questions you ask about the situation. Sometimes we’re asking the wrong questions. This is one of the skills that the Buddha had to teach his students and teach his listeners as well. Many times people would come to him with all the wrong questions. He was teaching them an end to suffering. There’s one famous case where a monk said, “Look, I’m not going to practice your teachings until you explain to me whether the world is finite or infinite, whether it’s eternal or not. Whether the soul is the same thing as the body or something different from the body. When a person gains awakening, does that person still exist or not exist or both or neither?” And the Buddha refused to answer those questions, because the mindset that wants to answer those questions pulls you away from the actual prospect of looking at what’s going on right in the present moment to seeing what you’re doing, how you’re causing suffering, how you might stop causing it. So if you find yourself with a problem in the mind, ask yourself, “What questions am I asking here? Maybe I’m asking the wrong questions.” Try to think in terms of the four noble truths. Where is the stress? What’s causing the stress, i.e., what’s arising with the stress and passing away when the stress passes away? What qualities can I be developing so I can see these things more clearly? Those are the appropriate questions. And part of your skill as a meditator is learning how to derive from those basic questions the questions that are just right for your particular problem. And then, finally, it’s what the Buddha calls “the path to enlightenment.” So, the path to enlightenment is the path to enlightenment. And the path to enlightenment is the path to enlightenment. And the path to enlightenment is the path to enlightenment. So the path to enlightenment is the path to enlightenment. And the path to enlightenment is the path to enlightenment. And the path to enlightenment is the path to enlightenment. That requires getting the sense of what’s just right, a feel for the practice. So as we meditate, we’re experimenting to find what works and what doesn’t work. And so be willing to sit through some periods when it’s not working so you can figure out what it means not to work and why it’s not working. But at the same time, remind yourself there are these ways of asking questions, different ways of approaching the practice, approaching the way you focus on the breath in terms of bodily fabrication, the in-and-out breath, verbal fabrication, the way you focus on things and the questions you ask about it, and how you evaluate it. And then, finally, your feelings and perceptions. What feelings in the body do you allow to stay the way they are, and which feelings do you try to clamp down on? Maybe you should adjust the way you relate to your feelings. Change your perception of where the mind is in the body and what it does when it focuses. And see how these things have an impact on the mind’s ability to settle down, have a sense of ease, well-being, fullness, refreshment as it stays here. Because the instructions you get in the books and the instructions you hear in Dharma talks are basically general principles. And it’s up to you to figure out how to apply those principles in a skillful way to what your particular problems are right now. Because the way you relate to the body, the way you relate to the movements of the mind, is something very personal and individual. It’s hard to get words for that sense of your awareness in the body. Dogon has a passage where he says, “When you’re sitting here, is it the mind sitting in the body, or is it the body sitting in the mind? What’s doing the sitting?” The questions may sound strange, but as you look at the way you relate to things, you realize they are very relevant to how you’re relating to the present moment. So you’ve got to take the words and adjust them to what your problems are and to get a better sense of what the problems are. And John Fuehring would often say that when the Buddha talks about right view, right resolve, all the way down to right concentration, think of it in terms of “just right.” And it’s up to you to gain that sense of “just right” as you get more and more sensitive to the practice.

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