Skills for Freedom

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When you approach meditation, try to approach it in the way you would approach trying to master any kind of skill, realizing that it’s going to take time and it’s going to involve a lot of false starts, a lot of ups and downs, times when you think you understand what you’re doing and then a few days later it doesn’t seem like you understand anything at all. And then a few days after that, things become clear again, in a different way. Then realizing that we actually are trying to attain something here, learning to bring the mind more under our control, to give rise to a sense of peace, a sense of deep calm, and the clarity that comes when the mind is calm. And so it’s not something you can simply clone by saying, “Okay, I’ll pretend that my mind is already calm. It has no desires, no sense of lack, everything is perfect.” That doesn’t work. What works is focusing your desire right now on the steps that will take you there, the things you have to do. Focusing on the breath. And that sentence right there contains an awful lot. How do you focus? What’s the nature of the focus? How much pressure do you put on the focus? Where do you focus? Experiment. And then, of course, breath. There are lots of different aspects to the breath energy in the body. There’s the in-and-out breath. There’s the subtle breath energies that flow through the blood vessels, that flow through the nerves. There’s a sense of energy that rises up in the body as you breathe in. There’s a sense of energy that goes down to the body as you breathe in. Lots of different things to explore. And that’s one of the purposes of having instructions on breath meditation, to alert you to some possibilities you might not have realized were there. I remember when I encountered Ajahn Lee’s teaching on the breath and thinking about the breath energy in the body and the different places it can go. For me, that was a revelation. Years way back, when I was studying meditation with a Zen master, he had talked about breathing down into your feet. And then over the years I’d forgotten that. And then Ajahn Lee pointed out again that it is possible. To breathe down through your feet, breathe down into your hands, breathe through your eyes and your ears. Think of a breath energy that comes up the back, helps keep your back straight and strong as you sit here. A breath energy that goes down the back, that helps to work through any tension that builds up. So there’s a lot to look at here, just in that phrase “focusing on the breath.” There’s a lot to explore. The attitude being, as I said, that we’re working on a skill. The more skills you have, the larger your sense of what you can do, the possibilities in the world around you. And this is an especially important skill, because it’s something that can stick with you through aging, through illness, and even through death. In fact, one of the reasons we work on it is that sense of heedfulness that comes when we realize that aging is going to come. It’s normal. Illness is going to come. It’s normal. Death is normal. Separation from all those we love and all the things we love is normal. We haven’t got gone beyond it yet. That’s a normal thing. So what are you going to do so that you don’t suffer when these things come? There are some skills that you can develop that will help you in the meantime, but will abandon you, say, as aging comes. My father was a woodworker, and I often noticed that when things were difficult between the father and my stepmother, he’d just go down to a shop. That was his release. That was his escape. And then he developed Parkinson’s. He was standing next to a planer one day. He lost his balance and ended up losing part of one of his fingers because he grabbed hold of the planer. Suddenly the workshop was out and he found himself a lot more restricted. There are times like that when you realize that the world closes in on you as you get older, and how much your sense of who you are also depends on your sense of the possibilities that are open to you out there in the world. And as those possibilities get smaller, you feel more and more confined. Which is why it’s important to develop the skills inside that don’t depend on the world outside at all. That you develop habits that are helpful. Habits that keep the mind occupied. Keep the mind entertained. Give the mind a sense of release and spaciousness even as the body gets less and less capable of doing things. That reflection we had, subject to aging, illness, death, and separation, the first four parts are pretty discouraging, but it’s the fifth part that reminds us that we do have some options. It’s the things we do, the things we say, the things we do. You think the habits we develop will really make a difference, because the habits you have now is your well. Some of your good habits depend on the fact that the body is well. You notice, as people get older, some of their bad habits come out. People you didn’t realize how stubborn they were, or their stubbornness was an appealing part of their personality when they were younger. As they get older, it becomes a real burden, both for themselves and for the people around them. That’s why you’re well. Work on developing the good habits that don’t depend on being well. Because those are the things that give more space to the mind. We talk about living in a house or living in a particular place where you live with your mind 24/7. And so you want a mind that’s a good place to live. I was reading a story one time about a man who’d suffered a major case of amnesia. He couldn’t remember his old friends, but he’d been a very likable person beforehand and continued to be likable after he had his amnesia. That habit stuck with him. So you want to look at the habits here, inculcating in your mind. We don’t think about it often. We give in to greed, or give in to anger, or give in to lust, or give in to fear or depression. But we are training the mind. It may not be a conscious training, and it may not be a very well thought out training, but the fact that we give into a habit again and again and again, that trains the mind in that habit. So you have to ask yourself, “What kind of habits do you want?” This is what the “I am the owner of my actions” means. “Heir to my actions.” You can train the mind so that it’s a good mind to live with. Think about Borges. He went blind in 1955 and stopped writing nonfiction, but he continued writing fiction after that. Some of his fiction sounded like sort of fantastical nonfiction. He took all the skills that he’d developed before he went blind and continued to use the ones that didn’t require that he go out and do a lot of research in a library. He took those and he developed them. The things that will stay with you and the things that will leave you, the body leaves you sort of bit by bit. As one of the Thai chants says, the different parts are running away. And the ones that are left are just house sitters, hanging on, hanging on, until nobody can stay here in this house any longer. So what kind of house sitters do you want? You want to have qualities of conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment, goodwill. This one is particularly important. The Buddha talks about this again and again, that when you’re suffering an illness, suffering from pain, it’s good to develop thoughts of goodwill so that the pain doesn’t overcome you. Be pain-spacious so that it’s bigger than the pain. It’s bigger than the restrictions that are placed on your body. This is the theme that appears again and again. Always try to think of the larger perspective. It’s not just you suffering. Suffering happens all over the world. You think about that in one way, it’s pretty depressing. But you think about it in another way, it takes the sting out of the suffering. You’re not the only one. This is what happens. It happens to everybody. And it’s not like you weren’t warned. So you do have the opportunity to prepare right now. What kind of world do you want to create through your skills? Because it is through your skills that you gain a sense of an expanded world, new possibilities that you wouldn’t have thought of otherwise, that would have remained closed if you hadn’t developed that skill. Some people see clay and mud, and that’s all they see, is clay and mud. Other people see it as an opportunity to plant crops. Other people see it as an opportunity to make sculpture. It’s the same clay and mud, but it’s an opportunity. The world of possibilities depends on your skills, depends on the talents you’ve developed. Some of the talents are in individual matter, but there are some basic ones like learning how to focus on the breath. That doesn’t require anything extraordinary. Learning how to be with the breath in a way that gives rise to a sense of well-being. So if there’s pain in one part of the body, you can create a sense of well-being in another part. You don’t have to be totally overwhelmed by the pains. And from there you can think about the fact that the body is not totally self-sufficient. It’s solid after all. It’s made out of atoms, and atoms are mostly space. Focus on the space. Hold that perception in mind. Remember that there’s no firm boundary between what’s inside your body and what’s outside. It gives rise to a large, much more open, spacious sense, even though there may be pain and restrictions in the body. A woman who was a student of Ajahn Fung’s was meditating one night, and this voice came into her head and said, “You’re going to die tonight.” And so her response was, “Well, if I’m going to die, I might as well die meditating.” So she stayed in meditation. And it seemed gradually that her body became more and more difficult to stay in. There were pains here and pains there. She said it was like a house on fire. No matter where she focused in the body, there was no place of comfort that she could find. And then she thought of space, the space around the body, the space that permeates the body. So she focused on that. She stayed there for quite a while. Then she returned to the sense of having a body again. She discovered things that settled down. So she learned an important lesson. If you can’t think of any other place to go, go to space. When the body gets less inviting to stay in. But if there are parts of the body that you can make comfortable with the breath, you focus on the breath. Focus on those parts. If you can’t seem to get away from the pain, well, look at your mind’s relationship to the pain. Physical pain is one thing. It doesn’t have to pain the mind. This is another possibility that many of us don’t think about. In the body, the mind gets pained as well. But it’s actually the perception or the way you perceive the pain, the way you relate to the pain, that’s what actually turns the physical pain into a mental pain. If you develop powers of concentration and discernment, you can start looking into that, analyzing it, so that you’re not simply on the receiving end of the pain, but you’re taking a more aggressive approach toward it, a more proactive approach. That, in and of itself, changes the balance of power. You start looking at how you perceive the pain. What’s your mental image of the pain? To what extent are you clobbering the pain and the body together? Remember, the body is one thing. The pain is something else. Can you see that? And your awareness of the pain is something separate from the pain. Can you see that? And as you take this more proactive approach, you find that the mind creates a huge space for itself, again, through its mastery of this particular skill. So remember this point, that it’s your skills that create your sense not only of who you are, but also of the world around you, where it’s wide open, where it’s confining. And the skills of meditation are those that create that sense of freedom, regardless of what happens with the body, regardless of what happens to the functionings of the mind as aging, illness, and death come. You’ve got the skills that enable you not to be confined by these things. Those are probably the most important skills you can develop.

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