Learning about the Mind

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We meditate to learn about the mind. And we learn in two stages. We learn some things about the mind as we’re trying to get it to settle down. We learn about the voices in the mind that are getting in the way. Some of which are unexpected. You tell yourself you’d like to meditate. It seems like everybody in the mind is on the same page. And then, as you actually sit down to meditate, you find that some of them have different agendas. They want you to settle down and close your eyes, because then you have time to think about all kinds of things. And you have to learn how to say no. And there is an element of wisdom in learning how to say no and make it stick. At the same time, you’re learning about what your underlying motives are, what your underlying impulses are. The things that are really weighing on the mind tend to come out while you’re meditating. Of course, at the end of the day you may tend to be distracted. There are too many other things that you’ve got to tend to right away, right away. You may want to let some of the deeper things show their face. In other words, there’s a lot of activity on the surface that distracts you from seeing what lies deep underwater. As you settle down with a breath, the deep underwater things have a chance to come up. And although you may feel frustrated with them, you’ve got to deal with them and remind yourself that it’s a good thing you know that they’re there. Otherwise, they’ll lurk around and come up only when you’re feeling weak, unprepared. Now you’re prepared. At the same time, you learn about how the mind actually creates a state of stillness. You need an object. You need the desire to settle down. So you focus on that desire, try to maintain that intention, and then use whatever other qualities you need in order to make it stick. You need mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind. You need alertness, the ability to watch what you’re actually doing and the results that you’re actually getting. You need ardency. You need the desire and the effort to really do it skillfully. This requires that you learn how to evaluate things, make distinctions. When a thought comes into the mind, you’re going to have to use thinking to some extent. So the question is, what kind of thought is this? Is it going to help with a breath, or is it going to pull you away? And is the mind ready to settle down with a breath? It may seem like you’re trying to put two positive poles of a magnet next to each other and they keep repelling, repelling, repelling. What’s the problem? Is there some other issue you’ve got to deal with first? Are you feeling discouraged in general? Can you remind yourself of all the good things you’ve done in the past, the skills you’ve been able to develop, the things that took time but finally paid off? Think of the times you’ve been generous, the times that you’ve been harmless. When you could have harmed somebody but you decided not to, or when you went out of your way to help somebody you didn’t really have to. Those kinds of thoughts give energy to the mind. If you’re feeling doubts about the practice, remind yourself that there’s only one way you’re going to learn about it, and that’s by doing it. Learn how to doubt the doubts. In other words, question them. Where are you coming from? What’s your ulterior motive here? Because there may be part of the mind that has something else that it wants to think about. So you’ve got to remind yourself that if you really want to think something through clearly, it’s best when the mind is still. So you learn how to make distinctions. Learn how to evaluate what’s going on. And in doing so, you learn a lot about the different functions of the mind—the mindfulness function, the alertness function, desire, the ability to make distinctions. That’s what discernment is. This is an aspect of the Buddhist teachings that’s all too often overlooked. The ability to distinguish what works from what doesn’t. And what works well from what doesn’t work quite so well. Sometimes you hear that we’re trying to overcome our distinctions between right and wrong, good and evil. Well, eventually the mind that doesn’t need those concepts anymore, when it’s found true happiness, doesn’t have to carry them around. But even then, you still use them. And you need them all the more while you’re practicing. Because there are types of actions that are the path, and there are types of actions that are not the path. There is wrong view, wrong resolve, wrong speech, wrong action, wrong livelihood, wrong effort, wrong mindfulness, wrong concentration. You’ve got to learn how to distinguish the wrong from the right. So that ability to watch and notice and make connections and figure out what works better doesn’t work quite so well. These are all important functions you need to get to know. And you get to know them as you’re getting the mind to settle down, as you put them to use, as you exercise them. In the same way, you get to know your body as you exercise it. You exercise it in different ways. And as they say, you find you have sore muscles that you didn’t even know you had those muscles until you know they’re sore. In this case, it’s not so much knowing that they’re sore. It’s simply noticing that you have to use this function, you have to use that function, if you’re going to get the mind to settle down. And if it’s not settling down, you’ve got to figure out what’s lacking. The Buddha gives lots of lists. In fact, his most central list of lists, the Wings to Awakening, is primarily qualities you need to bring to the meditation. Conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. That’s one list. Desire, persistence, intentness, the ability to use your powers of analysis, that’s another one. Mindfulness, the ability to analyze, persistence, rapture, serenity, concentration, equanimity. You notice that persistence and mindfulness are in all of them. Concentration and discernment are in all of them. So these are the things we’re going to learn about in our minds as we get the mind to settle down. Then you learn about the form of your body from within, the extent to which the mind has an impact on that, and the extent to which it has an impact on the mind. The same with feelings and their perceptions and thought constructs, the way you think about things, the way you pose questions, comment on things, evaluate things. That’s fabrication. And then finally, your consciousness of all these things. These are all the different functions of the mind that you learn about as you’re trying to bring the mind into stillness. At the same time, you’re going to be learning about specific defilements that pull you away. Sometimes sensual desire gets in the way. Find yourself sitting here thinking about how good something would taste, how you’d like to fix that tomorrow, something you’d like to see, something you’d like to do. Something you’d like to hear. These things all come up. And so you have to learn how to deal with them, reminding yourself that you’re here for a greater pleasure. And then you’ve got to show yourself that there actually is a pleasure here. This is why it’s good to work with the breath. Sleepiness comes up. You’ve got to figure out how to deal with that. Restlessness comes up. You learn different strategies for dealing with these things. And as you learn how not to get overcome by them, you learn some important techniques and strategies for dealing with the way the mind creates suffering for itself. And it doesn’t have to. It’s just simply the process of trying to get the mind to settle down with the breath and stay there for a while. You learn an awful lot about the mind. All the different members of the committee are going to come out at some point or another—the good ones, the bad ones—and you have an opportunity to see them in action. This is one of the reasons we try to get the mind still. The more stillness you can create in your focus, the more stillness you can create in the breath, the more easily you’re going to see other things that were hiding behind all the noise and all the motion, all the “come” motion. When things get quiet, it’s like sitting here in the sauna. If everybody’s chanting, you don’t hear the crickets so clearly. But now that everybody’s quiet, the crickets are pretty loud. That’s the next step. Once you get the mind still, you begin to see more subtle things. The first thing you’ll notice is that the desire to move things and change things, which was getting you into concentration, suddenly becomes a problem, because it wants to move and change things and probably change things too quickly. So this is where, once the mind is still, you have to be ready to just stay poised right there, balanced right there. And part of you will say, “Hey, I’m trying to be heedful here. I’m trying to not be lazy.” Well, the mind has its rhythms, and sometimes it can’t be pushed. What you have to do then is to learn how to keep your balance. There’ll be a part of the mind that gets bored. You have to learn how not to identify with that. There’ll be a part of the mind that says, “I don’t see any insight coming. This is stupid.” Learn how to drop that one away too. Just remind yourself that learning a sense of balance is really, really important for the mind, because the balance is what’s going to maintain that stillness. And you’ll see a little wobbling here and a little wobbling there. And you’ll want to look into it. This is the beginning of the insight inconsistency. But your focus right now is maintaining that balance. As soon as you lose balance a little bit, get right back to learning how to recover it. As I was saying the other day, it’s like watching someone on the tightrope. It’s not the case that the person just glides down the tightrope in a perfectly straight line. There’s a little bit of back and forth. Then the skill is not so much in not leaning at all in any direction, but it’s learning how to recover quickly. And in doing so, you see a lot of subtle little things. As you’re trying to maintain your balance on the tightrope, you learn about subtler vessels that you didn’t notice before. It’s the same with the mind. As you’re trying to maintain your balance, you begin to see subtle little movements, a little bit of irritation or a little bit of impatience. All the little things that hide in the noise now come out and get exposed. It’s in dealing with these things that the real insight comes. And you realize that these little voices were really controlling things. They were the ones who were making you suffer. It’s when the chant talks about discerning suffering. Even though it seems a little strange, we all know that we suffer to some extent. But it’s discerning the subtle movements, the subtle types of suffering, and the subtle causes. That’s what we get the mind still for. But don’t think that it’s only when the mind is perfectly still that you’re going to see these things. It’s in the process of getting it down there. You’re going to see some important ones as well. So whatever happens in the course of the meditation, whether it goes well or doesn’t go well, whether the mind is quiet or not, remember it’s always an opportunity to learn.

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