Think Strategically

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When you practice meditation, you’re developing a skill. And as with any skill, you have to learn how to think strategically. You can’t just go straight to the goal. You have to make a few turns here and there. It’s like a carpenter. Say he’s building a table. He needs to cut the wood. He needs to put pencil marks on the wood in order to cut it properly. Even though he doesn’t want pencil marks on the final table, you’ll have to erase them or sand them away at some point. But there are times when he has to mark the wood up with pencils. Or like a soccer or football team, you can’t just kick the ball from one end of the field right into the goal. You have to kick it back and forth, back and forth, back and forth down the field. Before you can go straight into the goal. So here we are, meditating. Trying to train the mind, but what are we focusing on? We’re focusing on the breath. Eventually you’ll be turning around to look straight at the mind, but first you’ve got to really get to know the breath. Notice how it feels when you’re breathing, what kind of breathing feels best. You can pose these questions to the mind. Even though we may have heard that when you’re meditating, eventually you’re going to get the mind to a point where it doesn’t have to think, but still you have to think in order to get there. You have to learn how to use your thinking properly. So if the mind’s going to talk to itself, talk to itself about the breath. When you’re breathing, where do you feel it? How deep does it go? Would it feel better if it went deeper? Give it a try. If it feels tight or tense, allow it to relax. After all, you want to be able to stay with the breath. So you want to get it as comfortable as possible. When there’s a sense of ease and comfort, think of it spreading through the body. When we talk about the breath, it’s not just the movement of the air in and out of the lungs. It’s the energy flow in the body. It draws the air in and lets it go out. And that energy flow you can feel anywhere. It flows along the nerves, it flows along the blood vessels. You may not notice that at first, but as you get to know the breath, get to know the breathing process, you begin to get more and more sensitive to it. And you should let the sense of ease flow through the body. You may run into areas where you just can’t loosen it up. There seems to be a blockage or there’s something not quite right. Again, you have to learn how to think strategically here as well. Sometimes if you focus straight in on the problem area, it just makes it worse. Maybe the problem is actually caused by the energy flow in a different part of the body. If there’s a pain in your stomach, you may want to focus on the back, the pain in your right side, focus on the left. There’s a certain amount of indirection in the practice. And just because you’ve heard, “There are people who gained awakening by focusing straight in on the pain and focusing on the pain,” that doesn’t mean that that’s the place you have to go right now. You learn to search around for more indirect ways of healing. Attacking it, working with it. The same applies to our sense of self as we meditate. Eventually, you’re going to want to let it go. But you have to learn how to use your sense of self, or your many senses of self, because it’s like you have a whole stable or a whole committee in here. You’ve got to develop some skillful members if you’re going to fend off the unskillful ones. That’s when you look at the Buddha’s teachings on how to motivate yourself to practice. They correspond in many ways to what psychologists call mature ego functioning. The psychologists talk about anticipation, seeing that there are dangers down the road that you have to prepare for. That’s a healthy ego function. The Buddha uses the word heedfulness, realizing that your actions make a difference and if you act unskillfully in ways that harm yourself or other people, you’re going to suffer. Other people are going to suffer as well. But if you can learn to act in a skillful way, then you can avoid that suffering. Another healthy ego functioning is altruism, realizing that your happiness is going to have to depend on the happiness of at least some other people. Your happiness depends on anybody’s suffering. It’s not going to last very long. So you have to take other people’s happiness into consideration. The Buddha calls this compassion. And the root for compassion comes from your realization that you love yourself very strongly and other people love themselves very strongly too. So you can’t treat them in a caring way. You have to think about their hearts as well. Another healthy ego function is suppression, realizing that certain emotions, certain feelings, are going to be unskillful. If you act on them, you’re going to create a lot of trouble for yourself. In Buddhism, we call that restraint. It’s not repression. You’re not denying that they’re there. You know they’re there, but you realize you can’t act on them. This gets paired with what they call sublimation. You try to focus that desire, focus that energy, in a direction where you’re going to find a happiness that’s not harmful to anybody. This is why we look for happiness in the practice of virtue, in the practice of generosity, and especially in the practice of meditation. You’ve got to get the mind concentrated in a state where you can tap into a sense of ease and well-being, even rapture, awakening. Then you need it. That takes the edge off those voices that want to do something really unskillful. And finally, there’s humor. You’ve got to have good humor about all this. If you’re deadly grim about the practice, it’s very easy to go off the rails. The Buddha doesn’t talk about this too much, but you see many examples in the Canon. Look at the famous Ajahns. They all had a really good sense of humor. That was one of the first things that attracted me to my teacher, when Ajahn Fuang was his sense of humor. It wasn’t sarcastic, it wasn’t nasty, it was just good-natured and very wise. It consists of the ability to see the irony in your own behavior. There are times when you’re trying to fool yourself, and you know you’re fooling yourself, or trying to fool yourself, and you can see right through it. One of the easiest ways to deal with that is to see it as humorous and let it go. But there are other ways the Buddha has you develop motivation for the path that I haven’t seen in any psychologist’s writings. There’s a pair of what the Buddha calls “pride and shame.” As with any skilled craftsperson, you want to take pride in your work. This is the case with the Buddha’s teaching, Rahula, in which he says that if you see that you’ve done something wrong, you’ve harmed yourself, even though you tried not to harm yourself or other people, but you harmed either yourself or somebody else, you should feel a sense of shame about that. Now, that’s not the kind of shame that’s debilitating or unhealthy. It’s a healthy sense of shame that goes with pride. In other words, you see that that action was beneath you. You’re a better person than that. Then he says, talk it over with someone else. Don’t be so ashamed that you can’t talk about it. And then resolve not to make that mistake in the future. When you see that you’ve acted in a way that hasn’t harmed anybody, you should take pride and joy in that. Again, it’s not the kind of pride that says, “Well, whatever I do must be good.” It’s the kind of pride that says, “I’m a person who’s always willing to learn.” That’s a really useful sense of self. And if you’re going to be proud about something, be proud about that. Because if you can’t be proud about that, the unskillful members of your committee are just going to run all over the skillful ones. The skillful members of your inner committee need strength. They need to have a sense of well-being. They need to take pride in their work in order to do it well. Finally, there’s inspiration. You see a noble example, someone who’s behaved in a noble way, and it inspires you. This is why we have the recollection of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Think about all the noble things the Buddha did, all the hardships the Sangha went through, and on the other side. There’s a passage in the Canon where there’s a monk who’s off in the wilderness and he’s sick. He says, “What am I going to do? Am I going to run away? No, I’m going to stay right here and I’m going to think of all those who practiced in the past.” Develop good qualities of mind. I use those good qualities of mind to deal with the illness. So even though ultimately we’re going to get to a point where we don’t need a sense of self, you’re going to need to develop a good sense of self until you can get there. It’s not that you tell yourself, “My self is bad, my ego is bad, I’ve got to throw it away.” You train your sense of self to be a lot more skillful, because that’s what a sense of self is all about. It’s to find happiness. And you simply get more and more skilled at the selves that you raise, that you feed inside, and then, seeing that there are unskillful senses of self, you let them go. You allow them to starve. And you use the skillful ones to overcome the unskillful ones. And when you finally find the ultimate happiness, you don’t need any sense of self at that point, because you’ve got what you wanted. You can let them all go. You can pick them up when you need them, but you also know how to put them down. That’s when the mind is really free. So remember that as you meditate, you have to think strategically. To get to the mind, you have to focus on the breath. To get to the point where the mind doesn’t have to think, you first have to learn how to think properly. To overcome suffering, sometimes you have to let go. Look not at the suffering itself, but search around someplace else for the cause. To let go of your sense of self, you first have to train a lot of skillful selves and learn how to use them as you would tools. It’s in learning how to use them as tools that you begin to get some distance from them, step back from them and say, “Oh, this particular sense of self is good for this kind of problem, but not for that one.” And when you can think strategically in this way, that’s when you’re really going to understand the problems of the mind and how to get beyond them. So think of this as a skill in whatever lessons you’ve learned, from developing manual skills dealing with sports, music, whatever the skill. Try to see what lessons you can take from that skill and apply here. It gives a huge boost to your meditation.

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