Trial & Error, Trial & Success

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Try to drop all of your thoughts of things outside, things in the past, things in the future, any issue that would pull you away from being attentive to the breath right now. Now, some thoughts are actually helpful. The thoughts that remind you to stay here, the thoughts that remind you of the very various techniques you can try to bring things into balance. That kind of thinking is useful, because it doesn’t put too much pressure on the breath. We go through the day with our various concerns, our desires flowing here and our dislikes flowing there, and they put a squeeze on the breath energy in different parts of the body. And then we go around carrying some of these feelings with us. So things get distorted inside. Energy gets pushed off into one part of the body or another. So now it’s time to let things come into balance. Think of your spine being straight, not like a ramrod, but it’s straight enough to hold your head up. And ask yourself if there’s more tension on the right side of the body or on the left. Breathe a couple of times and see how your breathing affects that. Can you breathe in a way where the tense side relaxes and stays relaxed, and at the same time you maintain your posture erect? Allow some time for this to work itself out. There are imbalances in the body, and as with any complex system, it takes a while for the imbalances to balance out. You’re just here to tend to things, give things a little space. That’s where you learn how to look after yourself. Because as we all go through life, we need as much inner strength as possible, both for our own sake and for the sake of others. This involves both strength of body and strength of mind. And a good source of that strength is this ability for the mind and the body to get together and be snug with each other and balanced. And if you’re going through life in an unbalanced way, it’s going to take a while for things to balance out. So you give it space, you give it time. And when you think of adjusted things, try to adjust them in the most gentle way possible. One of the gentlest ways is simply to hold a different picture in mind about what the breath is doing, or what the breath can do. If you try to squeeze breath energy down into your arm, what you’re squeezing is a lot of blood and other bodily fluids. That’s going to affect the circulation in the rest of the body as well. Sometimes if you put a squeeze on things in the wrong way, you end up with a headache or tightness in your throat, tightness in your chest. So instead, think of the breath channel simply opening, opening, opening up. And you’re sitting here surrounded by breath energy. That’s another way we get the breath out of balance, by thinking that we’re on one side of the world, looking at the breath right in front of us. You have to realize all around your head, all around your body, wherever you might be, there’s breath energy around you. Hold that image in mind. The breath is coming in and going out from all directions, and you’re trying to maintain your balance right here. You may slip a bit, but that doesn’t matter. If you’ve ever watched a tightrope walker, it’s not that they glide across without any motion at all. There’s a leading to the left and a leading to the right, and then there’s a correction when the leading goes a little bit too far. But it’s natural that there will be a back and forth. And you have to gain your own sense of balance. What you’re doing that’s bringing things out of balance and what will work to bring them back in. Because your vocabulary for describing how you sense the body from inside, what they call proprioception, that’s going to be a very personal thing. The books talk about breath energy going here, breath energy going there, and you’re going to have an image of what that is. And it may be a skillful one or an appropriate one, or it may not. And the only way you’re going to find out is by testing. Trial and error, trial and error, and occasionally, if you’re observant enough, you turn it into trial and success. Take note of that. See if the same understanding works the next time around, remembering that the needs of the body and the needs of the mind are going to change. So we’re being proactive here, but not impatient. That’s an important distinction. We realize that there are things that need to be done to get both body and mind into balance. But at the same time, we’re here to learn. And sometimes learning requires patience. You change something and it may not show its effects immediately. Other things will show their effects immediately. You’re here to learn. The teachings are to give you some ideas of possibilities. You explore them and you test them in your own experience. Try to get a better and better sense of what they’re talking about. And as you get more familiar with the territory, then you can begin to experiment, expanding the sense of your possibilities on your own. Take the case of Ajahn Lee, when he wrote Method One and Keeping the Breath in Mind. This was after having gone to India and seen all the yogis there, standing out in the open on one leg, lying on a bed of nails for hours. His question, of course, was, “How do they do that?” The way he answered it was different from most people he sat and meditated with. And the answer that came up in his meditation was that they play with the breath energy. Now, how much he was able to find out about how they play with the breath energy, I don’t know. But just that much opened some possibilities. So he started exploring these issues in his own meditation. Several years later, he went up into the forest in northern Thailand. He was going to spend the rain’s retreat way away from people for a while. He went to a place that required walking in three days. Before he got there, soon after he arrived, he had a heart attack. There was no medicine, no doctors, nothing around. And he was going to see the outside world again. He was going to have to get his health together and be able to walk back out for three days. So again, he used the breath. And this time, he experimented more with the breath in the body. Method One deals more with the head. Method Two deals more with the body. And by the end of the rain’s retreat, he was strong enough to walk back out. And if you look at his Dhamma talks from after that, he was continually experimenting—breath energy going up the spine, breath energy going down the spine, moving the breath back and forth, again allowing it to move back and forth from the right to the left, left to the right, exploring how the way the breath energy worked in the stomach and in the intestines to affect your digestion. He learned all kinds of things by experimenting on his own. Once he got sensitive to the issue that the breath energy is the most important medium in understanding how the mind and the body interact, he kept finding new ways to use that. His health was quite bad. He died a few years later from another heart attack. But in the meantime, he was able to keep himself going with the breath. It’s good medicine for the body, medicine for the mind. So you’re here to experiment, and the mark of someone who runs a good experiment is patience, that you’re meticulous, you’re careful, you don’t jump to conclusions. When the Buddha taught breath meditation to his son, Rahula, even before he died, he told him to make his mind like earth, make his mind like fire, water, wind—all in the sense that none of these things have any preferences. The earth doesn’t care whether you pour perfume on it or pour garbage on it. Fire doesn’t care whether it’s burning up beautiful things, ugly things. You need a mind like that so you can observe things. But that doesn’t mean you just sit there like a lump of dirt. Once you get into the steps of breath meditation, the Buddhist method is similar to Ajahn Lee’s in that there’s a lot of experimentation. Gaining a sense of how you fabricate things, how you fabricate your sense of the body through the breath, how you fabricate your state of mind through your perceptions and feelings, and then learning to use that understanding to bring things to calmness—it’s a very proactive method. But when you’re being proactive, you also have to be patient. You have to have that quality of the mind like earth. So you can tell that when you’ve given a trial and it ends up in an error, you know. When your trial ends up in success, you know. You teach yourself to be a more reliable observer. And that right there is a lot of the meditation. If you just run through the meditation and sort of bump into things, it never becomes a skill. You have to get a sense of, “What was I doing before the mind settled down? What was it like when it settled down? Where was it focused? What was the breath like? How did I come out? How can I maintain that as I go through the day?” When you observe these things, then the meditation becomes a skill. You become more reliable. Your skill becomes more reliable. And even though there may still be some trial and error, at least you succeed in knowing when it’s a trial and error and when it’s a trial and success. That’s how you grow as a meditator.

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