A Sense of Just Right

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There are a lot of ways in which meditating is like cooking. To begin with, you have to make do with what you’ve got. If the stores are closed and you look in your refrigerator and all you have are a couple of eggs and onions, well, you make eggs with onions. You’re sitting here, you’ve got the body. What have you got in the body? You’ve got the breath. You’ve got the thirty-two parts of the body. You’ve got the four elements. It’s not much, but it’s plenty to work with. Secondly, when you’re cooking, you’ve got to look at your needs. What does the body need right now? What kind of food would help with that? Then you try to figure out how to take what you’ve got and make it meet the needs of the body. Sometimes they’re not going to be met. They’re going to be hungry. The same with the mind. Sometimes the breath is not enough. That’s when you have to bring in other thoughts, other topics. Imagine the Buddha contemplating death. Whatever your mind needs right now, bring that in. One of the big issues, of course, is having a sense of just right. Just right doesn’t mean sort of middling halfway between two extremes, because sometimes that’s what happens as we’re cooking. If you’re fixing a lemon pie, then the question of how much garlic goes into it is very small. If you’re fixing garlic mashed potatoes, at least two whole heads of garlic may not even be enough. So you’ve got to get a sense of what you need right now and what is just right for right now. And there’s a lot of insight that comes there. Insight is seeing things as inconstant, stressful, not-self, empty, whatever. But a huge part of developing your discernment is getting the sense of what’s just right for your mind right now and focusing on the breath. How much pressure do you put on it when they talk about allowing the breath to expand? How quickly is just right? If you push it too hard to make it expand fast, you’ve ruined it. If you’re not fast enough, you don’t get advantage of the fact that when the breath does expand well through the body, it helps to prevent a lot of the pains that could come from poor posture or tightness in your hips. I learned when I was first meditating at Vatasukara. I had an hour and a half sit every night, and usually about twenty minutes into the sit my legs were numb. Then I realized if I focused on the breath energy and the spine right from the very beginning, keeping the whole spine open, keeping the whole spine erect but relaxed, and thinking of that sense of flow going down through the hips, that eliminated a lot of the problems. So how much pressure do you put on it? How much pressure do you want to put on the breath? How much pressure do you want to put on the mind? You can really force it down. And there are some times when a very strong force is what you need. The mind needs to rest very solidly, very still, sometimes. Other times, if you put too much pressure on the mind, you find yourself also putting pressure on the body. That’s not a good thing. And how do you learn what’s just right? Trial and error. This means you have to learn not to be afraid of mistakes. You have to learn how to recognize them, though. That’s another part of discernment. There are a lot of times when you don’t even discern that there’s a problem. Things are just that way you think. This is the way they have to be. And the question ever comes up, “What if they could be different? What if they could be better?” So, learning to recognize at least that you’ve got a problem. That’s a good start. Because once you solve this problem, then the next issue is going to be, “Well, where’s the next problem? Where’s the next?” Don’t think that by solving one problem you’ll be done with problems and everything will just be smooth sailing from that point on. Sometimes it will be smooth sailing, but there are still problems in the smooth sailing. They’re just a lot more refined. In fact, one of the worst mistakes you can make as a practitioner and as a meditator is to assume that you’ve reached a point where you don’t have to do anything anymore, yet there’s still actually a lot of work to be done. There’s that story of Bhakta Brahma, who assumed that he’d finished his work. There was nothing more for him to do. He’d reached an eternal state, he thought. The Buddha saw that he was deluded and went to humble his pride. Out of compassion. It wasn’t just the Buddha showing off. Well, they did a little bit of showing off, but it was to warn Bhakta Brahma that there was something more. So even if there aren’t any obvious problems in your meditation, you just want to sit very quietly and look to see what other subtle things there may be on the horizon. Again, it’s like cooking. Some people will fix a stew, and as far as they’re concerned, it’s perfectly okay. Someone with a more refined palate tastes it and they know that something’s seriously wrong. So as a meditator, you want to develop that refined palate, that subtle ability to read your mind. And again, it comes from this practice of trying something out, seeing what works, trying something else out, see how that works, then compare. Because what happens to be just right in any one situation is going to vary from time to time. Sometimes it requires a lot of effort, sometimes just very subtle effort. Sometimes you have to also realize that what’s just right may not be just right on the continuum between the two things you’re thinking about. Maybe there’s another alternative that lies off that continuum, that lies outside of it, like those issues that people raised. Is the world eternal? Is the world not eternal? And they felt the answer had to be somewhere along that continuum. And Buddha refused to answer. He said, “It’s totally irrelevant. What he was after was something else entirely.” Or that original mention of the middle way. One extreme is sensual indulgence, the other is self-mortification. But it turns out that the middle way between those two is not some pain and some pleasure. It’s learning how to treat pleasure and pain as means rather than as ends, and knowing when to let go. And to use which. We develop pleasure and concentration so that the mind can settle down and be still. It’s a particular type of pleasure. It’s not sensual pleasure. It’s the pleasure of form, your sense of the body as you feel it from within. It’s not as intoxicating as sensual pleasures, and it doesn’t have all those dangers as sensual pleasures have. Sometimes you hear people saying that concentration is dangerous for you because you’re going to get stuck. But getting stuck on concentration is not nearly as bad as getting stuck on sensual pleasures. People don’t kill over concentration. They don’t drag each other into family court over concentration. So it’s a different kind of pleasure entirely. So you use that to settle the mind. And then you start looking into pain. You learn not to run away from pain. Because if you’re going to understand it, and that’s what the Buddha wants you to do, is to comprehend it. To see what it is that you’re doing that’s causing the pain, what things you like are actually creating the pain, what ways of thinking that you like to think, what ideas you hold onto that are taking any physical pain and bringing it into the mind. And as you experiment with this, you begin to learn a lot of things that you wouldn’t have learned otherwise. You see possibilities you wouldn’t have seen otherwise. This is why some of the middles of the middle way are not right in the middle between two extremes. They’re off the continuum entirely. So it’s in finding where those middles are that develops your discernment to a great degree. And it’s going to be a step-by-step practice. It’s not the case that you sit here and crash through nibbana or crash into nibbana. You have to develop some subtlety, the subtlety of having that sense of just right. Because the dimension of the deathless is there all the time, and it can’t be broken. It can be realized, it can be touched. There’d be a better way of putting it. Potentially, at any time. But the problem is that our discernment is not strong enough to see exactly what we’ve got to pull away. This is why the practice is both gradual and sudden. Gradual in the sense that you work at your discernment bit by bit by bit, and then there will come the point. Where all you have is just one last thread holding the tapestry together. You cut that, and everything falls away. That’s the point where it’s sudden. But you’re not going to get to that sudden point until you’ve done the gradual work. That requires patience, it requires endurance, it requires determination, because you’re going to stick with this. Because meditation is unlike cooking in that you can’t just taste things right. You have to start away. Sometimes it takes a while for you to see that you’ve been doing something with the mind, and the effects gradually build up. Sometimes you see a dish of food that’s been burned. You know it’s been burned. Sometimes your mind has been burned, though, and you don’t even realize it. So it requires more patience, more endurance. But the effort is all well spent, more than well spent, because it gives you somebody who really can rely on those chants we had just now about the world being swept away. Well, the deathless is never swept away. It’s not a slave to craving. It’s not subject to aging, illness, and death. And it lies even beyond karma. We do those reflections, which sound negative, to remind us that there’s something that really is positive in here. And if you don’t see the negative side of your attachments, you’re not going to get to see the positive. There would be more than enough to provide happiness for all of us. More than enough happiness. At that point, there’s no question of just right. Just right is a matter of discernment. It’s a matter of the path. The happiness of nirvana is totally limitless. But we get there by focusing on the little things we’re doing right now, the subtle things we’re doing right now. And Changli has a nice image. She said the Buddha had to make himself really, really small before he could become great. So take your attention and focus on what you’re doing right now, right now, right now, the little things going on in the mind. Learn to take an interest in them. Learn to take them seriously. Develop a refined palate with the food you’re making with your meditation. And then it’ll explode into something really big.

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