Tips for Monotasking

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It’s natural when we meditate that we want results. But as with any skill, you have to have the right attitude, a mature attitude to what you’re doing. Because on the one hand, the results are not going to come as quickly as you want, and sometimes by pushing, pushing, pushing, you actually spoil them. It’s like playing a rose and then just putting lots and lots of fertilizer on it to the point where you burn the poor plant. Then you realize, “Okay, too much fertilizer is bad.” Then you turn and don’t put any fertilizer on at all, and the plant gets weak. The next plant, your plant gets weak. So you’ve got to figure out what’s the right balance here. Another comparison is like making scrambled eggs. You put the eggs over a very low fire and you stir and you stir and you stir. For a while it seems like nothing’s happening, and there’s a temptation to turn up the fire. If you do that, you will get scrambled eggs, but they’ll be rubbery. If you want nice soft scrambled eggs, you have to be very patient. We sometimes think that the instructions that are given in the meditation manuals are missing something. The fact that they give quick results. They say to stay with the breath, your mind winds up, you bring it back. Try to do that in a friendly but firm way. One of the ways of being friendly is to ask yourself, when you come back to the breath, what would be a really nice breath right now? What would feel good all the way down through the torso? See how the body responds. And if that breath feels good, well, give the body another one, and then another one. Until that kind of breathing doesn’t feel good anymore, then you’re done. You can change. The firm part is that as soon as you sense yourself about to wander off, you say, “Nope.” The mind has a natural curiosity, wanting to know what this next thought is going to be like. Or it gets bored with the breath and starts looking around for some other place to go. As soon as you catch that, come back to the breath and again reward yourself with a really nice breath. There are two qualities in a balance. One is patience, and the other is heedfulness. We talk about heedfulness as being the basis of all skillful qualities. Sometimes it sounds like there’s a big push, like when the Buddha says you try to put out the defilements in your mind as if your head were on fire. If your head were on fire, you’d have to rush around, make sure that you got it as quickly as possible. So you don’t want to be quick, but at the same time you have to be patient. That’s when they say that with each breath you realize you could die with the next breath. Again, that gives a sense that you’ve got to rush this. Well, you can’t rush things, but you try to do things well. Because again, if you rush them, it’s like putting too much fertilizer on the rose. If you don’t get any roses, the plant dies and everything is wasted. So you’re firm with yourself, but friendly with yourself. You have a sense that you really want to do this well, but you do it meticulously. And then you just stick with it, stick with it, stick with it, because a large part of getting the mind to settle down and feel at ease here is giving it time. Once it’s settled down, you’ve got to give it more time. You’re not going to have to push it someplace else. Our culture, our society, highly prizes things that are quick, things that change fast, multitasking. We’re doing monotasking. And for a lot of us, this is a new approach. Just work on one thing at a time and just be really with that one thing. After all, concentration is having one object, one intention. And then let that one intention do its work. Being a quantum is impatient. Don’t mean sitting here doing nothing. It means you do the same thing again and again and again. And don’t try to push it. If you’ve ever sharpened a knife on a stone, the old-fashioned way, you realize that if you get too anxious to get it done, you can ruin the blade. If you don’t put enough pressure on it, nothing gets sharpened. Once you find the right amount of pressure, then you just stick with it over time, over time. And learn how to give yourself little pep talks. The knife is now half done. Now it’s two-thirds done. That means there’s only one-third left. And then it gets closer and closer and closer to done. So learn how to increase your concentration. Stay right here, right here. This is where things are going to happen. It’s like being a hunter. You know where the rabbits tend to be, and you’ve got your weapons all ready. But then you’ve just got to sit there because you have no idea when the rabbits are going to come past. You do know, though, that when the rabbit comes past, you have to be quiet so you don’t scare the rabbit off. But you also have to be very alert so you don’t miss the sounds of the rabbit coming. They say that anthropologists, when they go and study different tribes, try to learn the skills of the different members of the tribe so they can get into the culture. And one of the skills they’ve never been able to learn is how to hunt in the old-fashioned way, because it requires a lot of concentration. It requires a very still mind, very concentrated, alert, quiet. That’s what you want. Sometimes we hear, “There’s a rapture that comes from this, and there’s pleasure that comes from this, and it can be very intense.” And you say, “Well, where is the rapture?” And then you want to start pushing things. Well, no, don’t push. Just take what you’ve got and have a sense of protecting it. There’s a Thai word, berkong. It’s the word they use when a mother with her child is just learning to walk. On the one hand, you don’t want to hold up the child too much. You want the child to learn how to stand on its own. But at the same time, you don’t want the child to fall down. So you have your hands just a little bit away from the child, ready to catch it if it falls, and you hover around. So try to hover around the breath and hover around your mind. As soon as it falls, you’re ready to bring it right back. Otherwise, you just let it develop on its own. So you have the child of your mind learning to walk. So hover around it a bit and learn the kind of patience and vigilance that go with this ability to hover around and be protective. Because the combination is the just right combination of being patient and at the same time being heedful. Having a sense of the importance of the practice, you’ve got to put all your attention in the present moment. But in putting a lot of attention in here, you’re not trying to squeeze things. Your attention is in the hovering around, in the protecting, in the concentration of the mind. You really want to develop the kind of concentration that’s solid and sure and organic. In the chan we had just now on the Eightfold Path, it talks about the different factors of right concentration. And there’s a tendency to want to use that as a recipe. First you put a little direct thought, then a little evaluation, then you add all the other factors, hoping that you’re going to get jhana. It doesn’t develop that way. That passage is more like a restaurant review. So this is what the dish is. The dish is like when it’s well done. Just pay lots of attention to the breath. Adjust it when you need to. Adjust your mind when you need to. That takes care of the direct thought and evaluation. Drop everything else, and that gives rise to what the Buddha calls the rapture and ease that are born of seclusion. Now, in the beginning they may not be very much, but if you protect them and you stick with the causes, i.e., staying with the breath, adjusting the breath, the rapture and ease will be allowed to grow. And when they grow in a natural way, they’re a lot more solid and a lot more secure and a lot more reliable. All you have to do is protect them, and eventually the child will grow. It’ll learn to walk on its own, and you don’t have to be quite so assiduous in your care. But you’re still there, looking over it. With concentration, you always have to look over it, because that develops the steadiness of the gaze that you’re going to need in order to gain insight. As Ajahn Fung once said, if we could push our way or squeeze our way into nirvana, we all would have done that a long time ago. What’s required is a delicate balance. That’s what the factors of the path are called, right, in the sense of just right. So try to be here in a just balance. Adjust right way and protect what you’ve got here in a just right way. And it’ll grow.

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