Imagination & Judgment

October 8, 2016

When you work on your skills as a meditator, it’s good to think about how manual skills have been passed down from generation to generation and how they develop. The passing down is simply a matter of learning to do what you’re told. The master craftsman shows you what to do and then watches you as you do it. It’s simply a matter of following the instructions and learning to adopt the teacher’s standards. And there’s a lot to be said for that in our world that places such a high value on innovation and being legacy-free. We often miss a lot that comes from learning to follow instructions. It’s picking up skills, benefiting from what’s gone before. From that, then, you can develop the skill. And as you develop it, there are basically three ways that you can develop it. One is to raise your standards. Do the same thing but be more meticulous about it. For example, with your meditation, you’ve learned the instructions about how to stay with the breath. And you may find that you’re getting a little loose in your standards. You stay with the breath for a little while, and then you’re off someplace else, and then you come back and you work with the breath here, work with the breath there, and then you’re off someplace else. And that becomes typical meditation. You have to be very careful about it. Your mind is slipping off like that. Why is it going? Where is it going? A lot of important things are happening, and you really want to be on top of it. If you want the meditation to make a real change in your mind, you have to be more stringent with yourself. The mind doesn’t go off at all. And when you’re with the breath and settled down with the breath, you start noticing where there’s some stress, some unnecessary stress, a sense of being burdened or weighed down by something you’re doing. In other words, you raise your standards for what counts as a good meditation. That’s one way that you make improvements. Another way is to take a skill you already have and apply it to something new. For example, when you work with the breath, you find that as you get more sensitive to the breath energy, it’s good not only for getting the mind to settle down, but you can actually work through pain. There are lots of pains in the body that are caused by the simple fact that the circulation of the body, the circulation of the blood, the circulation of the breath energy in the body, is not going well. And so you apply your skills as a meditator to working through some of those pains, not all pains will respond, but many will. Then you’ve expanded your range of skills by taking the skill you already have and applying it to something else. Another way in which skills are developed is by trying a new approach entirely, or turning things around. You’re about master craftsmen who come up with a totally new technique that changes the face of their particular skill. Nobody thought of it before, but once other people see it and it looks like something good and you get good results, then it catches on. Then everybody can do it. This means when you’re playing with the breath, really play with it. If you’re used to breathing in and out in a particular way, reverse it. John Lee sometimes talks about the breath energy going down the spine, for example, like he’s in instructions on keeping the breath in mind. But in some of his Dhamma talks, he talks about the breath energy coming up. Or there may be parts of the body, I’ve noticed in my own hip, that when I breathe in, if I think of the breath energy going down, it actually increases the pain in the hip. And I think of the breath energy coming back up as I breathe in. It helps to alleviate the pain. So turn things around. Use some ingenuity. In all these cases, the different ways of improving the skill come down to two qualities. One is your imagination. Two is using your powers of judgment. In other words, can you imagine a different way of doing things? Psychologists have studied the way the mind imagines something new. They found four steps, and they correspond to the four bases for power. First is you. Suppose you have an image in your mind. You just set the image there. You give rise to it. You generate the image. And then you hold it in place. And then you make adjustments. Make little changes here and there. And then you judge whether the changes are going to be good or not. That’s the proper use of your imagination. It’s not to just think up new things and go with them. You have to adjust. Then judge, “Is it worth it?” That’s the same with the bases of power. You generate desire to create a state of concentration. And then once you’ve got it, you hold it in place. And then you make adjustments. Pay careful attention. Use your ingenuity and then pay careful attention to see whether the adjustments are worthwhile or not. That’s the quality of intent and using your powers of judgment. In this way, your concentration develops. So you need the imagination to figure out if something is possible. Even before you think if it’s possible, just think of it. But then you’ve got to pass judgment on it. And this is where your discernment really develops. This is where the meditation has to go. It’s going to go beyond simply rote learning. It’s not just a matter of doing what you’re told to do. And there are way too many meditation techniques out there where they simply say, “Well, do this, do this, and today you do this, and tomorrow you do that.” You don’t learn to develop your powers of judgment that way. And insight really is a judgment call. Because after all, what are we looking at? We’re looking at the way the mind fabricates its experience. Through the way you breathe, through the way you talk to yourself. Through your perceptions and feelings. What are called the three kinds of fabrication—bodily, verbal, and mental. And we’re taking those types of fabrication and we’re turning them into a path. We want to do something more useful with this habit we have of putting our reality together out of the raw materials coming from our past karma. And that’s with our reactions. The question always is, is the action possible? And two, if it’s possible, is it worth it? And if you can decide that the path is possible and the path is worth it, you follow through. You start out with the basic principles, and then you start dealing with the more particular details as they come up in the course of the practice. And it’s in dealing with those details that your knowledge changes from that are so similar that comes from what you’ve learned, into the discernment that comes from thinking things through, and then finally the discernment that comes from actually developing these qualities. And then judging if they’re worth it, if they’re better. If you don’t take some risks, you’re never going to learn anything. Remember staying with Ajahn Fuyang? I’ve told you many times before that he would criticize me for not putting things in the right place when I was cleaning up his hut, but he’d never tell me where the right places were. I’d seen other people treated that way by Ajahn Fuyang. They’d just stop. They wouldn’t do anything at all. They wouldn’t be willing to take the risk to figure out what was the right place. And if you don’t take the risk, you don’t learn anything. He wanted you to be in a position where you had to take risks. And use your ingenuity. In cases like that, of course, he was the final judge as to what was the right place or what was not. But after a while I began to learn that you didn’t have to ask for his approval. There were times when I actually did make a few changes in the way things were organized around there because I figured out he would like it. I got a sense of what he was looking for. I tried some new things. And I got so that the changes I made were not rejected because I learned how to read him first and take a few risks. And it’s the same with your meditation. You want to take it beyond where you are. You want to take it beyond where you think you can go. We may have the attitude or the aspiration that we want to gain stream-entry or we want to become arahants. We have no idea what that means. We have some vague ideas in our mind. We’ve read books and we’ve listened to Dharma talks. There are people out there that we think to ourselves, “This person must have some attainment.” But you don’t really know until you’ve gotten there. And it turns out that the experience is going to be something beyond what you can imagine. So that means you have to learn how to stretch your imagination as you practice. And at the same time, stretch your powers of judgment. Make them more refined to see what really is worth the effort. And that’s how your concentration becomes a basis for discernment. So it’s not simply a matter of being still and thinking that insight will magically appear out of the stillness, getting the mind to settle down, keeping it settled down. Your actions and the way you do that, as you go from one level of concentration to another, should sharpen your powers of discernment and also your powers of judgment as to what’s better. In the beginning, it’s like going around in a room with a blindfold on, just holding your hands out, pumping into things, getting the mind into one state of concentration where it feels one way and getting into another where it feels another way. At first it’s pretty random, but then after a while you begin to see a pattern. But it’s important that you learn to figure out, “Well, which is better?” And particularly given your state of mind right now, which you have to learn how to read, what does it need as you get into concentration? Because as you get more and more skilled, you begin to realize you can get the mind into different levels of concentration, and they serve different needs. It’s not the case that you always want to go to the most refined level of concentration. There are times when the mind needs to back up a little bit, say, and just stay with a sense of real refreshment and rapture. When the body is tired, when the mind is tired from work, it needs its big hit. So don’t be too quick to jump over that stage. So it’s an exercise to realize your ingenuity and to exercise your imagination and your powers of judgment. That’s how your discernment gets exercised and developed. And that’s how the practice progresses. And that’s how your skills as a meditator become your skills. So even though there’s a lot to be said for learning to follow instructions, it’s important to be willing to put yourself under a system of training. That’s just the first step. It’s when you expand your sense of what you can do, or how you can apply what you’ve learned, and how you can figure out new ways of doing things. Those are the steps that lead you beyond to something you can’t even imagine. When you’ve reached it, you know it’s better than anything else you’ve ever experienced.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2016/161008_Imagination_&_Judgment.mp3>