A Safe Path

November 3, 2017

We read stories about people who gained awakening simply on hearing the Buddha give a Dhamma talk, or sometimes even a very short teaching. That’s what we’d like. A quick awakening straightens everything out so that we can get on with our lives. That’s all the work that got them to that point where they could awaken—the drudgery, the ups and the downs, and all that’s involved in mastering the skill of getting the mind to settle down and be in concentration. Lots of what you might call unhistoric acts, the ones that don’t make it into the stories. In fact, if someone was watching his breath, it wandered off and then realized it and came back. Watched it wander off again, came back. Those things don’t make it into the text, but they are the basis of what we’re doing. We’re working on a skill. The purpose of the skill is to make the mind still. There are few things more dangerous in life than insights that come to an unstable mind. Most of us raised in the West—raised by TV, raised by social media, raised by the internet—have a lot of instability built into us. So we have to learn how to work it out. Yet part of the problem with the instability is that we’re impatient. We’re suffering and we want to find a quick relief, because we’ve been taught to be impatient. We were impatient already. But ours is one of the few cultures that actually encourages impatience. So that’s what we have to learn, step by step. Learn how to talk yourself into being willing to be patient and seeing the value of patience. And stick with the little steps of being with the breath, noticing when you’re about to slip off, so that you can firm up your intention to stay with the breath and your ability to stay with the breath. See that as an important accomplishment. There are studies of people who have mastered manual skills, physical skills, and they tend to be emotionally a lot more stable than people who haven’t. It may not be all that glamorous, the work that goes into a skill like carpentry. The little things you learn about your tools, the little things you learn about your tendency to misuse the tools so you can learn how to compensate, they’re little things, but they add up. And they teach you some important lessons. How to stick with something even when it’s not interesting, when it seems it’s the same thing over and over and over again. And how to see the value in that. And John Lee talks about this a lot. He says it’s like a path that you follow day after day. You notice the little things here and there. If you want just once through the path, you might pick up a few. But there are a lot of things you’d miss. But the fact that you go over, back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, up and down the path, means that when there are slight changes up to the side of the path, you’re going to notice them. Or little tiny plants come up that weren’t there before, and you’ll learn how to recognize them. Which of the plants are useful? Which of the plants are poisonous? It’s the repetition of this process. The breath coming in, out, in, out. That enables you to see a lot of the little details not only of the breath but also of your mind. And the act of seeing those things may not seem all that impressive, but bit by bit by bit they make you more and more familiar with what’s going on. So think of this as learning a skill. Not that you’re going to have some instant breakthrough that’s going to solve all your problems. It’s a gradual process of healing the mind, mastering the mind. The kinds of insights that come from getting the mind to settle down may not be all that impressive to begin with, but you do gain a familiarity that you didn’t have before with what’s going on in the mind. And the concentration gives you a place where you can step back and look at your ideas, look at your realizations, and not get blown around either by the good things or the bad things, or the things that seem good may not necessarily be good. The concentration also gives you a place where you can test things. Because it’s not the case that everything that comes up in a quiet mind is an insight, or a valuable insight. All kinds of things are bubbling up sometimes. So you want a place where you can test things and not prejudge them, not try to force them to pass the test. You know what happens when a teacher tries to arrange a test for the purpose of getting the student ahead without really testing the student. The student’s then left without any real knowledge. He goes to another teacher, goes to another place, and his student’s lack of knowledge all of a sudden becomes a real problem. That’s the same when an insight comes. You say, “I want this to be a great insight,” and then it leaves you. It doesn’t really prepare you for the things that you really need to know about how to watch your mind, how to be more patient, more perceptive, how to test things again and again. So you become a more reliable judge of what’s going on. So it’s good to take time to go back and forth over the breath, over this interface between the breath and the mind, your awareness of the breath throughout the whole body. We tend to think of the mind as being in the head. We want to get out of the head and into the body. So you can observe what’s going on in the head from a little bit of distance. And also you find that the awareness that goes down into the body helps act as a gauge for when things are getting unbalanced up in the head. How does it feel to breathe down into your toes? How does it feel to breathe down into your abdomen? All the different parts of the body. Allow them all to be present to your awareness, aiming at a state that feels balanced. When Ajaan Fuang was teaching about the elements or the properties—earth, water, wind, fire—the purpose was to bring them all out of balance so that the body felt neither too hot nor too cold, neither too light nor too heavy. You can play with a little bit sometimes when things are out of balance. When it’s cold outside, where is the warmth? When it’s hot outside, where are the cool areas? When you’re feeling giddy or dizzy, where is the earth? Where is the solidity in the body? When you’re feeling down, what elements in the body or properties of the body can lift you up? In other words, when things are out of balance, how do you bring them back into balance? And then how do you maintain that balance? Because it’s with the balance that comes stability, and with the stability comes the ability to withstand your insights. In other words, not be so taken with them. And so that willingness to stick with a task again and again and again, even though it is unhistoric—nobody writes stories about the fact that you were able to bring your mind back just now. We’re not here to write stories or to have stories written about us. We’re not here to try to figure things out. We’re trying to get the mind so it can heal itself. So instead of being its worst enemy, it can become its best friend. And as with all true friends, it requires a lot of patience and a happiness to be patient. That doesn’t mean you just sit there and do nothing. It means that you have a task that you do again and again and again. You stick with it. But you’re not trying to anticipate when the results are going to happen. After all, the Buddha taught not only a path to safety, but also a safe path. And the safety comes from the fact that you can be balanced, and that you really know what you’re doing. And that comes from repetition, from sticking with the breath again and again. I was giving advice over the phone one time to a Dhamma teacher who wanted to practice concentration. He had a month and a half at a retreat center. And as he told me later, he got frustrated because for the first three weeks, every time he said anything about his realizations in the meditation, I said, “Well, just stick with your breath. Stick with your breath.” And it was toward the end that I was able to change the instructions. And he found that, as a result, after he’d left the retreat center, the concentration he’d developed really stuck with him. After having told people for years to carry your practice into daily life, he found suddenly that he could do it for the first time. So, back to the breath. It may not seem all that inspiring, but back to the breath is what enables the mind to settle down and get in a position where it can actually trust itself and put itself in a place of safety.

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