Judging the Path

September 19, 2023

The path we’re on doesn’t have any signposts that say how far it is to the end. But there are ways of checking whether we’re on the path or not. That’s an important distinction. There’s a passage in the Canon where the Buddha says it’s like a ship that’s been dragged up onto the shore. It’s just left to rot. And you see that the ropes wear through, wear through over time, exposed to the sun, the wind, the rain. And you don’t know when they’re going to wear through, but you know eventually they will. Like a carpenter using a hammer, you see the handle of the hammer wearing away. And you know that someday it’s going to wear away, totally. But you don’t know when. So those are images for telling you that you can’t measure how far it is to the end. Some people mistake that, thinking that you shouldn’t try to judge the path at all, just keep on doing it without trying to judge it. But the Buddha’s not saying that, simply that you can’t tell how long it’s going to be. While you’re on the path, though, you can judge and see if you’re getting the desired results. And this starts with his very first instruction to Rahula. Look at your actions. Act only on the intentions that you think will be harmless. And then if you find out they’ve caused harm, you’ve learned an important lesson. You consult someone else, get their input, and then you resolve not to repeat that mistake. If, though, when you reflect on your actions, you see that they have been harmless, you need to take joy in that fact and continue practicing. So this reflection, judgment, is an important part of the path. Think of that image the Buddha gives of the cook. The cook tries to notice what dishes his master likes and then makes more of those. If the master doesn’t like a dish, well, you know not to make more of that. It’s in this way, the Buddha said, that you get a sense of well-being from the practice. You learn to read the mind, see what it needs, see what it wants, and then provide that. So exercising your powers of judgment is an important part of the path. It’s how you stay on the path. It starts with right concentration, the very first factors of the first jhana. You direct your thought and evaluation. You direct your thoughts to the breath. Then you evaluate how well it’s going, and you make adjustments. Try to figure out what kind of breathing feels good. What does the body need right now? This may take some time and requires your powers of observation, but then that’s what we’re trying to exercise, is our powers of observation, because that’s what discernment is all about. Ultimately, we’re trying to develop the discernment that leads to dispassion, which are value judgments. You find that you’ve been engaged in an activity and you realize it’s simply not worth it. So you start with something simple like the breath. What kind of breathing is good right now? And if it’s uncomfortable breathing, it’s not worth it. Try something else. Faster? Slower? Deeper? More shallow? Longer? Shorter? Heavier? Lighter? Try to get a sense of what the body wants right now, what it needs right now, and then provide that. What does the mind need right now in terms of the breath? Sometimes it wants to rest, which is perfectly fine, even without perfect breathing. If the mind wants to rest, give it some time to settle down. Just be very still. But then you notice after a while, after it’s rested a bit, it’s not satisfied with what it’s got. That’s when you start more direct thought and evaluation again. So you’re learning how to read the mind, read the body, look for their needs, and then provide for their needs. This is a good part of concentration practice. You’re supposed to find a topic that the mind likes, a topic that the mind is glad to be with. Now, the in-and-out breath at the beginning may not seem particularly gladdening, but if you learn how to explore it, it has a lot of potentials. There was that forester John who complained to a John Lee one time. He said, “What is there to see in the breath? Just in and out, in and out.” And as John Lee said, “If that’s all you see, then that’s all there is.” The implication, of course, being that if that’s all you see, you’re not looking hard enough and you’re missing out on some important potentials. This is one of John Lee’s refrains, that we have all these potentials in the body and in the mind that we don’t make use of. We haven’t learned how to explore them. So here’s your opportunity. You can explore them. Explore these things until the breath feels really good—so good that you realize there’s no need to improve it. Then you can forget about the direct thought and evaluation and settle in and just stay right there. And if any thoughts come up saying, “What’s next?” You say, “Well, this is what’s next.” Getting really good at staying in place, really good at not being knocked off by thoughts like, “What’s next?” If you get knocked off, you just get back right on. The breath is always there. It’s very forgiving. And then after a while, the mind will have a sense of “enough,” in which case you pull back a little bit. The Buddha calls this the fifth factor of Noble Right Concentration, where you reflect again. Given the state of mind you have right now, where is there still some disturbance there? Is this as quiet as it could be? A lot of it has to do with the perception you’re holding in mind. When Ajahn Fung was teaching, he had that book by Ajahn Lee which detailed the different levels of jhana. But he never mentioned jhana in his meditation instructions. He would ask his students, “How does a breath feel to you right now?” And they would describe it and say, “Well, try this. There’s a breath that bathes the whole body. There’s a breath that seems to infuse the body.” There’s one image that Ajahn Lee had. He said, “It’s like ice cubes evaporating a little bit.” The water is very still, but there’s still a kind of evaporation. Then there’s a breath that’s perfectly still, like a sea that’s totally still. You get quieter and quieter and quieter until the breath stops. Then he would have you think of the different elements in the body. It’s starting with fire. Where are the warm spots in the body right now? What happens if you focus on them and then think of that warmth getting more intense and then spreading through the body, the same way you spread breath through the body? Water. Cool sensations. Where are those most prominent? Focus there. Think of the coolness spreading. Earth. The parts of the body that seem solid, heavy. Where are they? Can you let that sense of solidity spread through the body? Then can you mix them? Like Goldilocks porridge. Not too warm, not too cold, not too energetic, not too solid. Just right. Maintain that sense of just right. So here again, you’re committing and then reflecting. Committing, reflecting. These are the kinds of things you can judge. Then when you’ve got something good, do your best to maintain it. Then you come to see what in the mind wants to nibble away at that and what in the mind wants to push itself into a different direction. Because it’s not the case that you sit there and nothing happens at all and you don’t gain any insight. It’s in the course of maintaining the concentration that other things will become clearer as they come up. Especially as you have that sense of a very still, cool awareness filling the whole body. Very, very still. The breath no longer takes up your awareness. It’s more a question of what’s happening in the mind right now. You can more clearly see how thoughts form. You slap a perception on them, saying, “This is a thought about x,” or “This is a thought about y.” Or, “It’s not a thought, it’s actually a stirring of the breath.” You can have that perception, too. But you do have the choice. And seeing that you have the choice is an important insight into the nature of thought. Because all too often a thought comes in and invades the mind, and you feel totally helpless in its presence. But when you see that you’re actually collaborating with it, and you don’t have to, that frees you from a lot of unskillful thinking. So learn to get something good going inside the mind with the breath as your anchor, and then learn how to maintain it and then reflect. It’s in this way that your powers of judgment are a useful part of the path. And as long as they keep you on the path, they keep you walking, you’re heading in the right direction, and it doesn’t matter how long it’s going to be. What matters is that you stay on course.

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