A Meditation Mechanic

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In John McPhee’s book, Coming Into the Country, one of the people he profiles is a man whose family has lived in the Alaskan wilderness for a long time. He’s not a subsistence farmer. He’s got a lot of machinery. He’s got a plane that he flies in and out. He’s got an earth mover. He’s built a fairly comfortable life for himself with his family. John McPhee noticed one day he was fixing his engine in his plane and he asked the man, “Is there any equipment you have here at the farm that you can’t fix?” The man thought for a bit and he said, “No, I can fix everything.” That story reminded me of another book by another New Yorker writer, Ian Fraser, who made an arrangement with two Russian men to drive him across Siberia in an old van. And every now and then the van would break down. They’re out in the middle of nowhere. And the man would walk along the side of the road and they’d find car parts, cars that had broken down, and left their parts behind. And that was their repair shop. They would find something to fix whatever was going wrong. And that way they made their way all the way across Siberia. The point of both these stories is when you’re looking after yourself, you have to learn how to be a good mechanic for the mind. We have that chant, “May you look after yourself with ease.” It requires the ability for you to diagnose the problems in your mind and your body. We’re talking about the way you feel the body from within. And figure out what to do. The Buddha gives you some manuals, like his instructions for breath meditation. When the mind doesn’t settle down with the breath, you look to see is the problem with the breath or is it with the mind? As you try different ways of breathing, and you try to get so you can be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out, some parts of the body, the movement of the breath energy will be more obvious than others. But there is some breath energy everywhere in the body. It’s already there. Just in some instances, it’s blocked. And you have to have a good concept of how you deal with that kind of problem. You just relax. You don’t push things through. We’re not here to push things completely. We’re pushing something inside. It’s usually pushing the blood around. That can create headaches. There’s a lot of pressure, say, in the chest or pressure coming up into the head. So we’re not here to push the breath energy around. We’re here to allow it. All you have to do is open the channels and the breath will flow. It’s like turning on the valve to water in a pipe. Or cutting roads in the wilderness. When you cut roads in the wilderness, you don’t have to push the traffic onto the roads. People will come on the roads on their own. You just have to keep them open and repair. So it’s the same with the breath channels in the body. Wherever there’s a pattern of tension or tightness, it’s a sign that the breath is being blocked. And all you have to do is relax that. Now the breath flow, the results may be very subtle. But rest assured that it’s there. And then you can engage in what the Buddha calls calming bodily fabrication, which is simply allowing the breath to calm down. Again, don’t try to stifle the breath. Don’t use force. It’s just that the more things get interconnected inside, the sense of breath energy saturating the body, the less felt need there is to breathe. So that’s dealing with the breath. Then there’s dealing with the mind. And the mechanics manual for the mind has basically four steps. One is just being sensitive to what state your mind is in. The taijans make a lot of this point. So when you start meditating, look at your mind. Is it leaning forward or leaning back? Leaning to the left, leaning to the right, which symbolizes, of course, leaning forward means thinking thoughts about the future, leaning back, thoughts about the past, left or right, about things you like or dislike. You want to put those thoughts down, so the mind will be primed and ready to settle down. And the next step is to gladden the mind. You can gladden the mind by the way you live your life. The Buddha points out to generosity and virtue as ways of gladdening the mind. So that when you’re sitting down to meditate, you can think, “Oh, I was generous today. I helped this person, helped that person. I was virtuous. I didn’t break any of the precepts. I didn’t harm anybody.” That can put you in a good mood. Other times, though, the mind is not quite so willing to settle down. It’s got some issues. In which case, maybe the breath is not going to work. Here the Buddha says when you try to settle down and there’s a fever in the body, or a sluggishness in the mind, in which case you don’t feel comfortable settling with the breath. So you choose other topics, topics that you find inspiring. Lots of different potential topics. There’s recollection of the Buddha you can think about. The Buddha was a prince with lots of power, lots of luxuries. And he realized that that life was empty. He did something very unexpected. He was like a famous politician or a famous movie star. Suddenly he decided, “The life I’ve been living is empty and meaningless. I’m going to go out and live in the forest.” You have a few cases of those. But then the Buddha went beyond just living in the forest. He said, “I want to find something that doesn’t die.” That’s setting his sights really high. One of the big ironies of the way Buddhism is taught in the West now is that sometimes we’re taught the way, “Just accept things as they are. Learn how to be equanimous. Don’t set your hopes too high.” That certainly wasn’t the way the Buddha approached the practice. He practiced with two teachers who taught him very subtle states of concentration. He mastered those states. In one case it was the dimension of nothingness, in the other it was either perception or non-perception. And his teachers told him, “You can be my equal. You can teach now.” That was the first case. The second case was the teacher who had it in himself. He attained that level his father had, but he hadn’t. He was going to put the Buddha in charge. The Buddha saw that these states, even though they were refined and very subtle, could still change. They required maintenance. That wasn’t good enough. So he tried austerities. He said the austerities didn’t work. He tested them for six years. Before he came to the conclusion that he was going to kill himself, he wasn’t going to attain anything. There had to be another way. He kept looking, looking, looking. There must be another way. So if nothing else, think about his determination. Think about how he had set high standards for himself. And he finally met them. He was able to teach. For 45 years he walked all over northern India. Teaching wherever there were people or other beings that were ready to be taught. After all the trouble of setting up the Vinaya, the monastic orders, his teaching would have a vessel to carry them on. So he was thinking not only of the people alive at his time, but also the many generations to follow. So wisdom, purity, compassion. Think about that. There was such a person in the world. And he shows what human beings can do. To see if those thoughts inspire you, get your willingness to settle down, and to drop whatever issues of the day that you’ve been holding on to. You think about the Dharma, how clear it is, how direct. How useful. The Buddha didn’t teach anything that was superfluous. You know the story. He was in the forest with the monks one day, picked up a handful of singsapa leaves. Now these leaves are like little tiny, tiny dimes. They’re very small. He picked up a whole handful of them. He said, “Which is more, the leaves in my hand or the leaves in the forest?” And of course the monk said, “It’s the leaves in the forest.” The same way he said, “The things that I awoke to in the night of my awakening are like the leaves in the forest. What I brought out to teach is like the leaves in my hand. What have I taught? All the Four Noble Truths. Why did I teach them? Because they lead to unbinding, they lead to release, they lead to ultimate happiness. The things he didn’t teach didn’t lead in that direction. So again, the Dharma is basically an expression of the Buddha’s teaching. The Buddha’s compassion, as is the Sangha. The fact that he taught all these people and set up this order. Those thoughts can inspire you. If you’re feeling down in yourself, you can think of your generosity, think of your virtue. In other words, ways of gladdening the mind. The good thing about death, even that can gladden the mind. In a sense you realize you could go at any time. Like that story I was told when I was young. We lived in a little town in Kansas and there was a big Indian mound up to the west of the town. And the story was that this one family had set up a little inn there. It wasn’t a long time. They were robbing and killing the people who would stay in the inn. If it was a group of people, they’d leave them alone. But if someone was coming alone on this trail going west, they’d sit them at a dinner table and there’s a trapdoor under the seat. At some point during the dinner, the trapdoor would open, he’d be plunged down into the basement and killed. Death is like that. You can die at any time. There’s a story about a woman. She was the sister of a famous gourmet in France. She was having a dinner and all of a sudden she felt something unusual happening in her body. She had some great last lines. She said,”Bring on the dessert. I think I’m about to die.” And then keeled over and died. So it could happen. It could happen at any time. And you think about how precarious your life is. And then you think about, well, you do have the means to prepare for that, which is the practice. In fact, when the Buddha’s talking about being in the present moment, paying very close attention to the present moment, it’s always in the context of mindfulness of death. Death could come at any time. You’ve got to do your work right now. But there is work you can do. There are ways you can prepare. This is what the meditation is all about. Preparing so you can face aging, illness, and death and not suffer from them. So those are some of the ways you can glide in your mind, get it ready to settle down. So you’re sitting here trying to meditate and things are not coming together right. You’ve got a manual that you can use. The different steps in breath meditation tell you that these are the ways you can troubleshoot your problem. You can be a meditation mechanic. And if the ways that are given in the text don’t work, well, you can be like those men looking for parts along the side of the road. There’s got to be something. There’s no problem you have in your mind that someone hasn’t been able to solve. Always hold to that principle. And the question is, well, if somebody did this, how would they do it? It’s like those cases of skills suddenly developing. One craftsman figures out a new way to do something. And then once he’s done it, another craftsman can see, well, this can be done. Maybe he doesn’t explain how he did it, but once the idea gets out there that something can be done, there are people who figure it out, reverse engineer it. So you’re trying to get the mind to settle down, remember. Someone has done this before. It’s much different between them and you. Their breath isn’t different. Their body’s not really different. What’s different may be the confidence that the problem can be solved. And experience in having solved problems like it. But that confidence is something you can build inside yourself. And experience, well, comes with time. But it doesn’t just come with time. It comes with your trying different things and figuring out what works and what doesn’t work. Sometimes learning to think outside the box. But it is possible to be your own mechanic so you can fix any problem inside the mind. And at the very least, get the mind to settle down with a sense of well-being, with a sense of belonging here, fully inhabiting the body. Alert, mindful, and ready for whatever comes.

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