Commit & Reflect All Around

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We nourish the environment within us through commitment and reflection. We commit to doing it, and stick with that commitment for a while, so we can have some time to show results. And then we reflect on the results. Are they doing well? Are they not doing well? And then we can make adjustments and commit again. That’s how the Dhamma is found. Not by anticipating what we’re going to find, but actually working at what needs to be done, and then looking at what we’ve accomplished. Right anticipation is not one of the factors of the path. Mindfulness is. Mindfulness is to remember. It’s not just being aware of things as they arise and pass away. It’s a faculty of your memory. It’s your active memory. You’re remembering to stay here, stay with the breath. And it’s for any of the thoughts to come into the mind, and they will come into the mind. You just let them go. Don’t let them pull you away. One of the forester giants has the image of you’re sitting in a house, and you have the one chair in the house. And as you’re sitting in the chair, other people will come into the house, and they’ll want the chair. So they’ll do outrageous things. You get out of the chair to chase them away and find out that they’ve slipped into the chair behind you. So you stay in your chair. In other words, you stay with the breath. Wherever you feel it in the body. When the Buddha’s talking about breath, he’s not talking about the air coming out through the nose. That’s a tactile sensation. He’s talking about one of the properties of the body itself. The energy you feel as you breathe in and breathe out. That allows the air to come in, allows the air to go out. You want to focus on the energy. Where do you feel that? Which parts of the body are most sensitive to how the energy flows? For some people, it’s in the middle of the chest. For others, it’s in the throat. In between your eyes. There are lots of different places where you could be sensitive to this kind of energy. So focus on what seems to be the most obvious spot. The most sensitive spot. And try long breathing for a while to see how long breathing feels. If you’re not sure if it’s good, you can try shorter breathing, faster, slower, heavier, lighter. Have something to compare. And as you make comparisons, you begin to see this is better than that, that’s better than this. It’s through experimentation like this that the mind can settle down. The Buddha defines discernment as “knowledge of arising and passing away, noble, penetrative, leading to the ending of stress.” On the surface, it sounds like watching things come and watching things go. But notice it’s actually noble, penetrative, leading to the ending of stress. It’s not just watching things come and go. Noble knowledge is what puts you on the path to a noble attainment, where there’s no aging, illness, and death. There’s no defilement. The mind is totally free. Simply watching things coming and going is not going to get you there. What you need is what he calls penetrative knowledge, which you understand is some activity of the mind, good or bad. Notice what’s causing it. Notice its diversity, the Buddha calls it, which means what ways is it good, what ways is it bad? What’s the range of suffering or happiness that this particular phenomenon can provide, like feelings or perceptions, thought constructs? How does this thing cease? What is the path to its cessation? Well, the path to its cessation in every case is going to be the Noble Eightfold Path. And it’s by following the path that you get to the end of stress. So you’re not just watching things coming and going. As you watch them come and go, you try to understand them. And to understand them, especially to notice what causes them and what they result in, you’ve got to manipulate them. You’ve got to play with them. Different things. Because you realize that you are on the shaping side of your experience. Manobha, mangamma, tama, mano, ceta, manomaya. First person, the Dhammapada. The mind is the forerunner of all things. They’re made by the mind. And they’re made excellent by the mind. So it’s what you do, what the mind does, is the source of these things. You want to look inside. What are you doing? You don’t think you’re simply passively watching something. There’s a lot going on under the surface. You’re doing a lot more than you think you are. That’s called the fact of fabrication. And then you want to get a sense of the value. When you’re making something, like when you’re putting together a state of concentration, is it worth it? For the time being, yes. You want the mind to have a place to settle down. In the process of settling down, you’re going to learn about it. And when it’s fully settled down, you’re going to be in a position where you can see things really clearly. What this means is you have to be sensitive to what you’re doing, and have some imagination in trying different things. You look at the teachings of the Forester Johns. You know, there’s no one Forester John method, or no one Forester method of meditation. And Chan Lee has his approaches to breath meditation. You read the other Chans, they have their approaches. Why is that? Because their teacher, Chan Mun, sent them into the forest. The basic instructions were, practice as best you can, and observe what you’re doing. See what works and what doesn’t work. And they all came up with their individual ways of explaining things. Some were more articulate than others. Some were more observant than others. But you can learn from their example. You take their teachings. Like Chan Lee recommends that you work with the breath energies in the body. You take his teachings and you experiment with them. Try out what he has to say, and then make some adjustments. Like he says, think of the breath coming in at the back of the neck, going down, down the spine, out the legs. Of course, he’s not talking about the air, he’s talking about the energy. What happens when you think of the breath coming in the soles of the feet and going up the legs and up the spine? Which feels better? In other words, you’re free to play. That’s what makes it interesting. If meditation were a meat grinder, you stuck your mind in and it would grind and grind and it would come out awakened. But it wouldn’t work that way anyhow. You’re here to engage your whole mind, engage your imagination, engage your interest. The meat grinder would not be a very comfortable, interesting place to be. But here you’re allowed to play. And then you observe. The play, of course, is committed play. You’re not just playing around. Think about the athletes at the Olympics right now. They’re playing at their sports. But they’re very serious about what they were doing. They wanted to do it well. And they learned in the same way. Try to do it well and then gauge your results and see what you can do to change. And the really good ones come up with new ways of observing what they’re doing. So you commit and then you reflect. And then you try to figure out how can you keep your mind interested here? How can you keep your mind happy to be here? And again, as John Lee recommends, working with the breath. Because you find that you have some illnesses in the body. Some pains here and pains there. Well, how does your perception of the breath affect those? Can you breathe in ways that alleviate the pain? If you have a recurring disease, can you breathe in a way that helps strengthen the body against that disease? And that’s how he found the breath meditation method to begin with. He had a heart attack when he was out in the forest. No doctors, no medicine. Three days walk. From the nearest road. So he used his breath. As he learned about the breath in the course of that time. He had a very strong motivating factor, of course. The question was, was he going to survive or not? He also observed a lot of things about the breath that he hadn’t known before. So you try to develop a sense of ease with the breath, so it’s comfortable to stay here. And then you start using your imagination around the breath. So it’s interesting to stay here. And by trying different ways of breathing, you get a better and better sense of cause and effect in the present moment. If you just watch things coming and going, you don’t know what’s causing what. Think of scientists, if they want to understand the cause for something, they have to manipulate various things that are potential causes. Do they see what actually gets the results? Well, it’s the same thing here. So commit and reflect. And then commit again. Reflect again. Psychologists call this ability to step back from your mind, metacognition, m-e-t-a. Where the mind can watch itself. And the better you get at watching yourself like this, the sharper your discernment is going to be, the more all around it’s going to be. Because of the goal we’re aiming at, eventually means letting go all around. And if you’re used to looking at things from different angles, you’re more likely to spot things that you wouldn’t have seen otherwise. Areas where you’re still holding on. So it’s a good habit to develop, learning to watch your mind from all around. Because then you’ll learn how to clean it up all around. So everything you need to know is happening right here. It’s simply a matter of committing yourself to doing it well, and reflecting as best you can. That’s when these things will become clear.

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