Really Know One Thing

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There’s a Thai phrase, “Ru kon thard, lert kon tham.” It literally means you know about things before they happen, and you’re a master before you’ve done anything. It’s not praise. It’s a way of describing people. People who’ve read up a lot know too many things before they’ve actually started meditating. And it gets in the way of their actually seeing what’s happening. So John Foon used to say that his favorite people to teach were the Chinese merchants in town. They had no background in the Dharma at all. They would come to meditate, he would tell them to do something, and they would do just that. And then as things developed, he would expand his instructions. But because they weren’t glancing down the road to say, “Well, when do we get to the next step? When do we get to the next step?” They were actually able to focus on the step that they were doing. This is important. It’s a principle that you find in many other meditation teachings as well. In Dogen, for instance, he talks about how the realization in Nibbana is to be found in the development of the path. In other words, in developing the path, the realization comes. So you don’t look for it anywhere else. You don’t glance down the road and say, “When is the goal going to come?” You focus on what you’re doing. And in the doing, you learn. This connects with another principle from the forest tradition. You start out with one thing. Then you get your mind happy to be with that one thing. The Buddha uses these terms. You’re confident, you’re steady. One translation says you indulge in the one thing that you’re focused on. Really immerse yourself. Get to know it well. Get to know the breath well. In the beginning, you start with the in-and-out breath. And then you start exploring the related movements of energy in the body, in the different parts of the body, down to the nerves, to the blood vessels, in the torso, in the head, in the legs, in the arms, down the spine, down the front of the body. Try to get to know the breath as best you can. As for the steps of breath meditation, you don’t have to think about them. As for the other things that are related to the breath, as you focus on the breath, you can’t help but notice that there are other things related to it. But you don’t want to move your focus away from the breath. The Buddha makes this point in his descriptions of the different tetrads in breath meditation. Careful attention to the breath, he says, is a feeling. When you breathe the breath, your mind is on alert, so you’ve got mental qualities as well. As you’re putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world, you’re developing the mental quality of equanimity. All right here. Everything you need to know is right here, so you don’t have to go away from right here. Just really get to know this one thing, and things will branch out. A lot of this has to do with how inquisitive you are, and how self-aware you are when you’re focusing on the breath. You’ve got both the breath and the act of focusing. In the beginning you want to give most of your attention to the breath. But remember here, we’re not here to have perfect breathing. We’re here to learn about the mind. And so as the mind gains confidence in the breath, gains interest in the breath, it becomes more and more present. And there you are. More and more of the mind is right here, where you can watch it. And your sensitivity to the mind, what the mind is doing, will grow. You begin to notice the different ways in which focusing, say, in the middle of the head, will have an impact on the breath. Focusing in the middle of the chest, what impact does that have on the breath? Focusing down at the base of your spine, what does that do? Thinking of two focal points at once, the middle of the head, the base of the spine, or the line connecting the two, what does that do? Or focusing on your hands, focusing on your feet, what does that do? Thinking of the breath going in places where you haven’t thought of it before, what does that do? By focusing the mind on one thing, you bring it right here into the present where you can watch it. It’s not like you’re going to be focused on nothing but the breath all the time. Being with the breath, you can’t help it. Notice what it means to be with the breath. As your awareness of what you’re doing gets more all around. It’s like learning how to play a musical piece. In the beginning, you simply want to get the notes right. And then you start thinking about the phrasing and the interpretation. You start listening to yourself play. You get more and more sensitive to how much of the mind is involved in playing a piece of music. So here, it’s the same sort of thing. You want to see how much the mind is involved in staying with one thing. And then the ramifications spread out. You keep your focus right here. Here in the body. You can move it around in the body, but always relate it to the breath. Again, as John DeFoy would say, this is the basis of our skill. So you don’t want to leave the basis. Everything has to be founded right here. Now, there are people who say, “Why focus on the breath? When you die, when you really need your meditation object, it’s going to leave you.” But the answer is, when you focus on the breath, you’re learning about the mind. Notice one of the steps in breath meditation is becoming sensitive to mental fabrication, i.e. perceptions and feelings, and then calming them. And in the course of reading the instructions on the breath meditation, you begin to realize the Buddha’s giving you ways of talking to yourself, which is called verbal fabrication. So you’ve got these two main mental fabrications, verbal and mental, right here at the breath. And you’re going to get sensitive to them. And being sensitive to them, that’s how you still have something to hold on to. As the body begins to slip away, as the breath begins to slip away from the body, you have some knowledge about how the mind works. And you’ve gained some knowledge into how you can bring it under control, so the processes of fabrication don’t go spinning out of control. So everything you need to know is right here. Just gain some confidence in being right here. Gain some steadiness in being right here. And be confident that this is not a dead end. This is actually how things begin to open up, by focusing on the one thing. And focusing on doing it well, being observant about doing it well. And that’s how your insight into what’s happening right now gets more and more all around.

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