Beginner’s Mind, Expert’s Mind

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You could say that tonight is the same as last night, in the sense that last night was dark and tonight is dark. Or you could say that it’s different. Last night it wasn’t raining; tonight it is. The same principle applies to the breath and applies to the mind. Each breath is different, but each breath is very much the same. The ways of the mind can be very different, but they can also be very much the same. And you have to be alive to both. John Lee’s image for the practice of concentration is walking back and forth on a path. It’s the same path. You walk back and forth, back and forth. And a lot of the path is going to be the same. But you’ll also be looking for the little differences. And a lot of the skill lies in learning how to be with something that is very similar—the breath coming in, going out, and yet not get bored and not zone out. You want to be alive to the possibility that something new will come up with the next breath. You’re here to develop a skill. There was a famous Zen teacher one time who extolled the beginner’s mind. He said, “In the beginner’s mind, all things are possible. In the expert’s mind, only a few things are possible.” The problem is, in the beginner’s mind, things are possible. They’re potential, but they’re never actualized, or not yet actualized. And many of the things that the beginner thinks are possible are actually impossible. So it’s good to develop beginner’s mind in the sense that you look for new things. But you also want the expert’s mind, realizing that there are certain questions that apply across the board. Part of the issue about beginner’s mind seems to relate to the fact that Zen was originally very much influenced by the I Ching, which has the idea that each moment is unique, and you have to sort of grok the moment in order to know what to do. That wasn’t the Buddha’s position. The Buddha’s position is that there are certain patterns that hold across the board, regardless of which moment it is. There are certain questions that are going to be useful across the board. And then when in the context of those across-the-board questions, there may be more detailed ones, but you want to get the basic ones down. They’re called appropriate attention, and they’re the questions that relate, on the one hand, to what’s skillful and what’s not skillful, realizing that your present moment experience is going to be the result of past actions coming in. But at the same time, they’re going to be the result of what you’re doing right now. What’s coming in from the past, you don’t have any idea where it’s coming from, particularly, or how it got there, or why it’s sprouting right now using the image of a seed that can wait for a long time and suddenly sprout. So that much is going to be new. But the basic pattern is that you’re going to be approaching the present moment. Even before you experience karma coming in from the past, you’ve got some intentions and you’ve got some ways of looking at things, some perceptions that you’re going to be applying. And you want to learn how to bring the right perceptions, bring the right intentions, bring the right questions. So be ready that anything could come up in the present moment, but you have some ideas about what’s skillful and what’s not. What kind of intentions to act on and which ones not to act on. Anything involving greed, aversion, and delusion. If you can recognize it, you don’t go with it. Anything involving sensuality, in other words, a fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures, you put that aside. Any thoughts of doing harm, any thoughts of ill will, you put those aside. You try to bring to the present moment an attitude of goodwill. Goodwill for yourself, which underlies the practice of appropriate attention, and goodwill for others. You want to act in a way that doesn’t harm anybody. You want to speak in ways that don’t harm anybody. You want to think in ways that don’t harm anybody. It’s because of that that you try to be skillful. And then it goes deeper. There are also the questions of the four noble truths. What right now is the stress? What right now is weighing down the mind? It’s one of the words of one of the four ashtajanas. What’s putting a squeeze on your mind right now? It’s your own clinging. Where is the clinging right now? That’s something you’ve got to look for. The Buddha advises that to do that, you’ve got to get the mind into concentration. You start with the right mindfulness. In other words, try to be, say, with the breath in and of itself. Ardent, alert, mindful, putting aside any thoughts of greed and distress with reference to the world. That’s a task you’re bringing to the present moment, the same task that you brought last night and the night before. And then you see if you can get the mind to really be with that frame of reference. This is where you begin to notice the little differences. What’s getting in the way tonight may be different from last night. A different distraction or a different problem. Sometimes the problem is too much energy, sometimes it’s not enough. Sometimes it’s thoughts that you’re bringing in from events in the day. They’re eating away at the mind, or the mind is eating away at them. And you have to remember, what have you done in the past to deal with those kinds of thoughts? That was actually effective. Give that a try. This is where you combine the beginner’s mind and the expert’s mind. You bring in what’s worked in the past and try to apply that. If it works, fine. If it doesn’t work, that’s when you’ve got to use your ingenuity. What else might work? It involves being very observant. If you can’t figure out how to get past a particular distraction, watch it for a bit. Separate yourself out. Ask yourself, if someone else were watching this thought, what would they advise? Then as you deal with the different distractions, then the mind can finally settle down. When it settles down, again, concentration will be different from one night to the next. Sometimes there’ll be greater rapture, sometimes less. Sometimes greater ease, sometimes less. But whatever’s good, you try to maintain it. That’s one of those questions, one of those attitudes that’s across the board. And then see what happens as you maintain it. It may go in a direction that you might not expect. That’s how you learn. So what you’re doing is bringing a certain attitude, a certain framework, a certain set of skills to the present moment, alive to the fact that sometimes they won’t work. Then you’ve got to figure out some new ones. But this is how your expert mind develops, how it really is an expert. I’ve always wondered about that expert that the Zen teacher talked about, who had a very closed mind about things. The genuine experts are the ones who know that their skill can always be expanded on, always something new to learn. I had a friend one time who was studying pottery in Japan with one of their living national treasures. She was very discouraged in the beginning. She put her pots in the kiln and the next morning they’d come out and they’d be burned and misshapen, whereas his pots seemed to be coming out perfect every day, every day, every day. Until one morning she got to the kiln and apparently his pots had been burned. So he was sitting in the kiln trying to figure it out, what had gone wrong. That’s a genuine expert, someone who can bring his full range of skills to the present moment, or her full range of skills. Realizing that sometimes when something new will happen, something unexpected will happen, then you have to have the right attitude. You don’t get discouraged, you don’t get defeated by it. You figure out, “Well, here’s a new problem. Here’s a new challenge in the skill.” This is how a skill stays alive. This is how the expert remains an expert, not just some old fuddy-duddy set in his ways. So as you walk back and forth across this path, don’t let the sameness of the path get you down or become monotonous. After all, everything you’re going to need to know about awakening is here. All the processes of fabrication, the way you fabricate your sense of the body with your breath, the way you fabricate thoughts, conversations in the mind with direct thought and evaluation, the way you fabricate your mind with feelings and perceptions—these processes are happening all the time. And it’s learning how to see these processes to the point where you get dispassionate for them. That’s where the awakening is going to happen. So it’s all happening right here. It’s simply that you haven’t seen all the details yet. The Buddha gives you a set of questions, a set of attitudes, appropriate attention, to bring to each moment as a general framework. Within that framework, it’s going to require a lot of your own ingenuity to get past particular problems. But that’s how the Buddhist discernment becomes yours. That’s how the potentials of a beginner’s mind actually become actualized, by being both a beginner and an expert at the same time.

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