Work on Your Style

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There’s an old saying—I think it’s French—that style makes the man. We could make it more gender-inclusive, saying that style makes the person. You could take the thoughts of the people here in the room, write them down, and if you read through them, you could probably figure out whose thoughts were whose. And it’s the way we think, the way we express our thoughts, that’s what determines what we become. Think of the first verse in the Dhammapada, “The mind is the forerunner of all phenomena.” The mind is in charge. The things you do with a bright mind will lead to a happy result. The things you do with a clouded mind will lead to an unhappy result. You’re determining the states of becoming to which you go. So if you want to see how you would go about dying, look at the way you go about living. You’d be of the same style. It’s particularly clear in the way you meditate. John Fuhrer had a student who had extremely strong prowess of concentration, but her style of concentration was very forceful. Basically, it was strangling her mind and forcing it down. There was one time, very early, when I was a monk—I think it was my second year—I had to get a new bowl. I got one when I was first ordained and started rusting it out two or three times. I figured I needed something new, so I got a stainless steel bowl. It was back in the early days of stainless steel and bowls. I took it with me to see a John Fuhrer one time in Bangkok. I didn’t yet have a bowl bag. She happened to be there that night. The next morning she showed up and she had a bowl bag for me. She’d spent the night knitting it. So John Fuhrer had me give her the bowl bag. She hadn’t untied the string, so it was very difficult to get it on. It was too tight. But she forced it and forced it and got red in the face. You could almost see her swearing to herself as she was trying to get it on. And she finally got it on. As John Fuhrer said to me afterwards, that’s exactly how she meditates. So look at the style of your meditation, how you create the state of becoming here in the mind with the breath, and how you begin to observe the mind as it creates states of becoming to go away from the breath. It’s in both of these areas that you’re going to be learning about the process of becoming, and you begin to see the way you go from one becoming to the next. By the way, one becoming replaces another. It’ll be pretty much the same way at death. There’s a question sometimes, “What is it that goes from one state of becoming to another?” The Buddha never talks about what it is. He talks about the process. But you think about it as going from one dream to another. You never ask, “Well, what is it that went from the first dream to the second dream?” There’s a desire. There’s a wish. There’s a bit of craving and clinging, and then a new nucleus of a new becoming forms around that and replaces the old one as the old one passes away. This is the process of dreaming. This is the process of dying. This is the process of distraction as you meditate, to be a little kernel. You’re with the breath, but part of the mind is not with the breath. It’s planning its escape, and it plants a seed. It wants to go someplace. Sometimes it will go anywhere just to get away. Other times it’s more specific. But then it hides the seed from itself and pretends that it didn’t happen. This is something we all have to watch out for, the extent to which the mind lies to itself. And Chan Chah once noted that this is the first thing you really have to learn when you’re meditating and observing the mind, is to see how much the mind does lie to itself. It tells itself, “I’m with the breath, I’m with the breath, but it’s already planning its escape.” And then when your mindfulness lapses, your alertness lapses, then the seed will suddenly sprout, and there you are, off someplace else. What you’ve got to do is be alert to the fact that the mind will go, and then look for the telltale signs. And the best way to do that is to stop the new becoming as soon as you realize that you’ve left the breath. We’re not here to wander around. We’re here to stay with the breath and to understand the mind in the process. So you stop the becoming, let the loose ends dangle, and come right back to the breath. Then remind yourself that it’s going to happen again, and you want to see the stages. Over time, you’ll find that you get quicker and quicker at seeing these kernels become thoughts, and from thoughts, become becomings. And you go into the becoming, the creation of the world that’s becoming, as you go into it and take on an identity in that thought world of that breath. And the best way to get some control over this process is to learn some restraint. Restraint while you meditate, restraint outside the meditation as well. Because, again, the style with which you go through life is the style with which you meditate, and it’s going to be the style with which you die. If you suddenly allow anger to flare up, if you get easily offended, you imagine how offensive death is going to be. It’s going to come at the wrong time. Or it won’t come when you want to die, and you get frustrated that way too. So you’ve got to learn how to hold your emotions in check, hold your reactions in check, and use the concentration as a release valve so you don’t feel like you’re bottling things up inside. When you’ve stopped the state of becoming, you don’t bottle it up. You just let it go. Loosen it. Give it its freedom. But you don’t go with it. And the more skilled you get at this, when the becomings arise, you don’t go with them. You just don’t go in. The more you’ll see. Because, after all, the Buddha said, “Seeing things as separate.” And you want to separate yourself out of this process. Because then you can direct it. While you’re doing meditation, you direct yourself back to the breath. If the time comes to die, you can step out and say, “I don’t want to go with that one. That one looks pretty bad.” If there’s any anger in the mind, any frustration, any sadness, don’t go with those, because those will lead to bad stories. I want a better story. And that ability to hold the mind in check, to restrain it, is going to be your salvation. So look at the style of which you meditate. It’s going to teach you a lot. And if the style is bad, just as any writer, you’ve got to develop a new style. If the writer realizes that his or her style is awkward, people don’t want to read it, it’s unclear, you’ve got to go back and gain some lessons in what would be a better style. How do you do that? You do it by comparing. Try something new, and then compare the results with what you used to do. This is why it’s good to read the teachings of the Ajahns. You get an idea of different styles. Not only styles of writing, but also styles of thinking, which reflect their styles of meditating. You can think of Dogen. He kept saying that Dogen just taught just sitting. The modern interpretation is that you just sat there and didn’t do anything. You didn’t think anything. But you look at his writings. These are not the writings of someone who just sat there not thinking. As he said, when you’re sitting, you investigate. Is the mind sitting in the body? Is the body sitting in the mind? You ask questions about what’s going on right here, right now, to question your perceptions, to take them apart. You de-think your thinking, or you de-perceive your perceptions. You can read a Chan Mahambo or you can read a Chan Lee. Their styles are very different. But they’re both the styles that people who knew what they were doing had worked on. They give you an idea of what different styles you could use. A prime example, of course, is the Buddha. You look at his ability to make analogies. An analogy is the result of stepping back from a process and seeing it from the outside, seeing it from a different light. You say, “What is this like? And in what way am I being stupid?” If you compare yourself, the way you do things, with something really stupid, you’ll see that it then helps separate you from those ways of doing things. For instance, there’s the analogy of eating. When the Buddha says, “We cling to things,” he uses the same word for taking sustenance from things. But then he says these things should be used as tools. So you can ask yourself, “What would it be like to eat your tools?” You’d realize that it would be really stupid. You eat your forks, you eat your knives. Not only would you deprive yourself of tools, but you’d hurt yourself. This is what we’re doing as we cling. So learn to step outside of your becomings. Get a sense of your own style. When you see there’s a problem with a style, realize, “You can’t just let it be that way. This is just the way I am. This is the way I do things. This is the way I meditate. This is the way I live. It’s going to be the way I die.” If there’s a lot of mindlessness, a lot of chaos, that’s the way you’re going to die. Mindlessly and chaotically, that’s not what you want. So work on your style, both as you go through the day and as you meditate. This is one of the reasons why the forester jhansas place so much emphasis on how you clean things, how you arrange things. You don’t have to be psychic to read someone else’s mind. Just look at their room. So sometimes the change in style—you start from the outside, you work in, you go out and you clean your room—can be very meticulous about keeping it clean. And it will have an effect on the mind. Other times you work on the mind and you find that what you could live with before, you can’t live with anymore. So it works. Work on things from all around, from the inside out, from the outside in. That’s how we can get some more security about what’s going to happen as we continue to live and as we face death and aging and illness before then. It’s all a matter of style.

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