The Skills of Meditation

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When we come to meditation, when we come to solve a problem, we notice the extent to which our actions shape our lives. And you would think that because everything we do is for the sake of happiness, for the sake of well-being, that our lives would be full of happiness and well-being. But it’s not the case. There’s a lot of stress, pain, suffering. So what are we doing? And sometimes, as soon as you hear that, the big questions are, “Who am I? Where am I?” They sound like the questions that someone who’s had amnesia is suddenly coming to. But for the Buddha, the question is, “What am I doing?” That’s the question asked by someone who’s already doing something and beginning to realize that he’s not getting the results that he or she wants. The question is, “Why?” And the Buddha’s answer is, in Pali, avicca, which is translated as “ignorance,” but it can also mean “lack of skill.” In fact, the Buddha’s approach to solving this problem is to teach us some skills, like the skills of mindfulness, the skills of concentration. So as you sit down to meditate, it’s good to stop and think about what skills you’ve developed in the past—manual skills, artistic skills, sports, music. What were the qualities of mind that allowed you to develop these things as skills? Basically, it comes down to attention and intention. You have the intention to do something well, and you realize that intention by paying careful attention to what you’re doing. As the Buddha said, these are two qualities that in our minds actually precede our experience of the senses outside. We come to each moment with certain intentions, primed to pay attention to certain things. The Buddha’s observation is that if you pay attention to the right things and have the right intentions, you can learn the skills you need to get beyond that problem of suffering. In some cases, he expresses it as commitment and reflection. You commit to doing something, and then you reflect on what you’re doing. So here you commit to sitting down, establishing mindfulness on the breath. Breathe in, breathe out. Start out with some good, deep, long in-and-out breaths to emphasize the sensation of breathing in the body. As long as long breathing feels good, keep it up. After a while, you might decide that you prefer gentler breathing, softer breathing, more shallow, more deeper still, longer still. It’s up to you to decide. Focus your intention on being with the breath and paying attention to what you’re doing. Pay attention to what the results are, and then you can adjust. In the context of mindfulness practice, we call this mindfulness and alertness. You make up your mind that you’re going to keep certain things in mind, like the breath, and you’re not going to let the mind wander off. If it does wander off, try to bring it back. Now you do that with two other qualities, alertness and earthensing. You’re alert to notice what you’re actually doing and the results you’re doing. If the results are going well, you keep it up. If they’re not going well, you make a change. In other words, if the mind is wandering off, you either change the breath or you change the mind. This requires ardency and desire to do this well. So you talk to yourself. Ask yourself questions. This is where we move from the contemplation context of mindfulness into the context of concentration. You’re focused on a particular topic, like the breath here, and then you start asking questions about it. This is the attention that you’re paying, the reflection that you do. You evaluate what kind of breathing would feel best. When you get a breath that feels good, how do you maintain that sense of ease, well-being? If you grasp at it, you squeeze it, it’s going to go away. So you have to have a certain amount of patience. The Thayajans compare this to pulling in a fish. You have a fish on a hook. If you pull it too hard, the fish will start struggling. But if you pull it very gradually, it hardly realizes that it’s being pulled. And then you can get it. If you don’t like the image of catching a fish, think of some other experience you’ve had working on a skill that requires that you be patient. And to be patient, you have to be cheerful. Remind yourself you’re doing something really good here. There’s an enjoyment in getting to know your own mind, getting some control over it. And whether the results are coming fast or coming slow, you’re doing the right thing. You’re paying attention. You’re being intent. You’re committing to this. You’re reflecting on it. Things are balanced this way. If it’s just commitment and intention, you just push, push, push. You might be able to squeeze something out. And there’s that tendency on short meditation retreats to want to squeeze something out of the few days you have. But think of this as a long-term project. You’re not trying to squeeze anything. You’re trying to get the mind to settle down. To get it to settle down, you have to make it cheerful. You’re doing something good here. You’re not harming anybody. You’re not harming yourself. You’re not harming other people. You’re focused on getting to know your own mind. And as you get more and more familiar with the basics, you can start using your ingenuity. You can read in Ajahn Lee’s method, too, about the different ways that the breath can go in the body. But he himself didn’t limit his analysis of the breath to just those patterns that he talked about in that particular book. In his Dhamma talks, he talked about, for instance, the breath coming up from the bottom of the soles of the feet. In the book, he talks about the breath going down from the back of the neck, down through the spine, and out the legs, out the feet. But elsewhere, he talks about coming up from the soles of the feet, up through the legs, up through the spine. You can ask yourself which way of visualizing the breath to yourself right now feels best for the body, feels best for the mind. You can think of the body as being like a large sponge, full of holes. When you breathe in, the breath energy is coming in and out through the holes, from all directions. You’re bathed in breath. Or you can think a little bit deeper. The air makes a sense of energy coming in and out. What’s causing the energy coming in and out? It’s coming from within. After all, the breath is part of the wind element in the body, the energy there that allows for the breath to come in and go out. It’s not coming from outside. It’s coming from within. Where does it start? You can explore. This is another way of keeping yourself cheerful. You’re not here simply obeying orders. You’re exploring your own body, your own mind, as you feel them from within. This is your territory, a territory that tends to get neglected, especially as the world keeps pressing in on us, insisting that we have to know all kinds of things and we develop what they call FOMO, fear of missing out on what somebody else is doing someplace else. From the Buddhist point of view, the thing to fear that you’re missing out on is understanding that your actions do shape your life, and yet they’re shaping it in a way that’s not totally satisfactory. What are you doing wrong? Well, turn around and look. Be intent on developing this skill. Pay attention to how you’re doing it, and try to bring all the good qualities in mind that you can muster—your cheerfulness, your patience, your persistence, your ingenuity. There are lots of good things right here. Learn how to call on these good things in the mind to develop them when you need them. That sets you on the right track. So remember, as you talk to yourself as you’re meditating, it’s not just talking about the breath. It’s talking about the mind. You’re trying to bring the two of them together. That’s part of your intention. That’s part of your commitment. Then it’s simply a matter of watching how you’re doing and making adjustments. This is how any skill is developed. You might say that this is the ultimate skill once you’ve learned how to understand the mind as it relates to the breath. You can bring all these good qualities to other skills in daily life. So foster the right intention. Pay attention in the right way. In other words, ask the right questions. Look at the right places. And that’s how you overcome that lack of skill that’s making you suffer. That’s how you learn the skills that the Buddha says. They can take you places you wouldn’t imagine. The best being that you no longer make yourself suffer. And when you don’t make yourself suffer, nothing can impose suffering on the mind.

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