Survival Skills

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There are two kinds of skills that you master in life. The first kind are the skills that you master because you’re talented at them. And the other are the skills you have to master in order to survive. Whether you’re talented in them or not, you’ve got to master them. Our educational system tends to neglect the second kind. They try to figure out where you’re talented, and they direct you in that direction. So you end up learning skills that are easy to learn for you because you have that talent. As far as they’re concerned, they don’t want to waste time and money on getting you to know skills that you’re not good at. As a result, we don’t learn how to master skills that we’re not talented for, but we really need to know. Meditation is one of those skills. If you’re going to find happiness in life, if your goodness in life is going to survive, you need to learn how to get some control over your mind. That means you have to learn. If you don’t find it easy, you have to learn how to learn. The first requisite is that you learn how to talk to yourself to give yourself encouragement. You get on the breath and stay with it for a while, and then you fall off. And then you get on again and you fall off again. Some people give up right there. They say, “I can’t meditate because my mind is easily distracted.” But that’s like saying, “I can’t cook because I haven’t figured out how to turn on the stove.” If you want to survive in life, you have to be able to cook. You’ve got to learn how to turn on the stove. You have to learn how to get sensitive to different kinds of foods, what kind of cooking they respond to. Of course, a lot of your motivation right there is that you need to eat. So the same with meditation. You need to remind yourself that you really do need to get some control over your mind. If you don’t, your trains of thought can carry you off to who knows where, someplace in outer Mongolia. Then you wonder how you got there. You have to find your way back. Then you hop on another train and you end up someplace in Central Africa. So you have to learn how not to get discouraged by the fact that you’re not there yet. Keep reminding yourself that this is a good skill to learn. You’re really going to get to know your mind. You’re really going to get to know your body from the inside. So you do your best to talk to yourself, to convince yourself that this is really good to learn and that you can do it. Here’s where it’s good to read the stories of the monks and the nuns. There’s a text in the Pali Canon, a pair of texts. There are the verses of the elder monks and the verses of the elder nuns. Many of them talk about how many difficulties they had in getting the mind to settle down. In spite of the difficulties, they were able to do it. Many of them gained awakening. So you have to tell yourself, “They can do it. They’re human beings. I’m a human being. Why can’t I?” Then just learn how to stick with it. But try to be as observant as possible. Don’t be surprised when the mind wanders off. Just come right back. And when you come back, reward yourself for coming back. Take a good, long, deep in-breath. Now think of the breath going to every cell in the body. Because the breath is nourishing, and as you nourish more and more of the body with your breathing, you’ll be more and more inclined to want to stay. This is where you don’t just talk to yourself, you begin to realize that it does feel good to allow the whole body to breathe in. But be on the lookout for the next time the mind is going to wander off. I remember when Ajahn Fuhring told me that first, to watch out for the mind. I said, “How are you going to know?” Because usually you find yourself having wandered off already, and then you realize it. But as you get more observant, you begin to see there are some telltale signs that tell you how the mind’s going to wander off. It’s as if you’ve got a committee in there, and some of the members of the committee are traitors. They want to wander. They don’t like meditating. So they consult among themselves that the next time your mind first lapses, they’re going to go. And then they pretend that they haven’t made that decision, but the decision has already been planned someplace in the mind. So watch out for that. Another thing you can watch out for is the mind’s tendency to be with the breath, but it’s already looking for someplace else to go. If you’ve ever seen an inchworm at the edge of a leaf, it’s got legs on the front end and legs on the back end. The legs on the back end hold on to the leaf, but the legs on the front end are waving around, hoping that another leaf will come by. And when it does, it hops over. So learn to detect your mind when it’s in that posture, with the breath, but ready to go. Then ask yourself, “Why does the mind not like to be with the breath?” Now, part of the reason may be the breath itself. It’s not really all that comfortable, not really all that absorbing. So keep asking yourself, “What would feel really, really good right now?” Learn to get acquainted with the different parts of the body that tend to be lacking in breath energy. Maybe you can provide them with some. Again, remember, this is the flow of energy in the body. And remind yourself that the energy is there before the other sensations in the body. You’re not trying to squeeze the breath into tight areas, confined areas. Think of the breath saturating everything that is there. It’s there prior to the solid parts of the body. It’s not only in the lungs, but it’s everywhere. That makes it more interesting and more satisfying. So you’re paying full attention to what you’re doing. But always be prepared. The mind has those other parts, those other members of the committee, that are ready to run off. So don’t be surprised. Have a cheerful attitude all the way through this. Because after all, you’re doing this for the sake of your own happiness. The mind, when it’s well-trained, brings happiness. The mind that’s not trained can cause you a lot of trouble. It’s like having a puppy in the house. If it hasn’t been trained properly, it’s going to make messes everywhere. And so, even though it may resist training for a while, you just stick with it, stick with it. And after a while, it gets the message. So these qualities of convincing yourself that you can do this, that you’re capable of doing this, and then sticking with it again and again and again, and then paying careful attention to what you’re doing. These are the qualities that the Buddha’s talking about when he has that formula for right effort. Generating desire, arousing your persistence, upholding your intent. As in that passage we chanted just now, it’s based on right effort that the mind settles down, develops more mindfulness, and can settle down into right concentration. So we are working on a skill. The Dhamma that the Buddha taught is not just concepts to talk about and think about. It’s advice on how to become more and more skillful in gaining some control over your mind, and then using that control for a good purpose. It’s just to figure out why it is that you do things that cause suffering for yourself or for others, even though you don’t intend to suffer. You don’t act for the purpose of suffering. You act for the purpose of happiness, pleasure, well-being. But why do things turn out the opposite way? He says it’s because of ignorance. And part of ignorance is that you’re not paying attention to what you’re doing. The mind has this tendency to flow out. The Buddha’s image is of a river flowing. We just flow along. Our attention gets grabbed away, away, away from the present moment. So we’re not paying careful attention to what we’re doing. So it’s no wonder we don’t know why it is that we’re causing suffering, because we’re not watching ourselves carefully and we’re not asking the right questions. So a lot of the practice comes down just to that—learning how to watch yourself in action right here, right now, and learning how to ask the right questions about what you’re doing, why you’re doing it. When your awareness is consistent, you can begin to see. When you do certain things, it does lead to suffering, but you learn to stop doing them. It’s because your awareness gets more and more consistent that you can see the connections. We have trouble learning from our mistakes. We don’t see the connection between what we do and the results that come out, because we’re not here all the time. It’s like watching a TV show. You watch the beginning of the show, then you walk out of the room and you come back fifteen minutes later, and things have changed. And you don’t know why, because you went there to watch the drama develop. But if you stick with it, you can understand the story, you can understand why the characters change, why things turn out the way they do. So try to stay here as consistently as you can. And don’t get frustrated when you find yourself falling off. Just pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and keep at it. This is how you learn how to learn when you make up your mind. When you make up your mind to do this, to really commit yourself to it, watch yourself in action. Watch the results of what you’ve done, and then ask yourself, “If the results are not good, what can I change so that the results will be better?” So it’s commitment and reflection. And then, based on the reflection, you commit yourself again. You learn from your mistakes. And that’s how the skill becomes your skill. That’s how you master it. Just have a very strong sense of the importance of this skill, because it is a necessary survival skill. If you want your happiness to survive, if you want the goodness of your mind to survive, you’ve got to get good at this skill and put in whatever effort is required.

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