Practice Like an Adult

October 28, 2023

There’s a medical school that specialized in brain surgery. I think I’ve told you this story before. They realized that all the people who applied were straight-A students, but not all straight-A students would make good surgeons. So they had to figure out how to weed out the bad people. People who were smart but didn’t have the personality, didn’t have the character, to be a good surgeon. They found that in the interview, two questions were useful. One was, “Could you tell us about a mistake you made recently?” And if the applicant couldn’t think of a mistake, the applicant was out. But if the applicant could think of a mistake, then the next question was, “How would you do it differently this time?” And if the applicant hadn’t thought about that, again, the applicant was out. Or if the applicant would complain that it was somebody else’s fault, the applicant was out. It was the people who took responsibility for their own actions and were concerned about doing them well. Those were the ones who would make good surgeons. You have to have the same attitude as a meditator. You have to be able to look at your mistakes and be able to learn from them. This is the most basic lesson there is in the Dhamma that the Buddha gave to a seven-year-old son. You start with an intention and you evaluate your intention. If you act on it, is it going to cause harm to anybody? This could be physical action, verbal action, or even just a mental action. If you foresee any harm, you don’t do it. If you don’t foresee any harm, you go ahead. While you’re doing it, you check to see what the results are. Because sometimes some actions give the results immediately. If you see that you are causing harm, you stop. If you don’t see any harm, you continue. And then when you’re done, you reflect on the long-term consequences. If it turned out that you did cause harm, over the long term, then you resolve not to repeat the mistake. And then you go talk it over with someone else to get some ideas about how to avoid that mistake in the future. And also just to be honest. Because if you hide your mistakes from other people, you tend to hide them from yourself. While you’re talking it over, if the person listening is any good, you can detect some thing wrong in your attitude. And that person can talk about that too. So this is the basic attitude of any skill that you might want to develop. And it’s important that you see the practice as a skill. The Buddha himself would give analogies to people developing skills when he explained the practice. Learning to find the right object for your meditation is like a cook learning to find the right food. Learning to fix for his master. Learning to understand your concentration. So you can use that as a basis for release. It’s like being an archer who gets a variety of skills. Being able to shoot long distances, shoot in quick succession, pierce great masses. To shoot long distances is to reflect on what you’re doing now and what implications it has for the past and the future. To shoot in rapid succession means to see where you’re causing yourself suffering and how you can stop. And to pierce great masses is to pierce through ignorance. So again and again and again, the Buddha talks about this as being a skill. And Ajahn Lee picks up the theme more than any of the other meditation masters of his generation. It’s like learning how to weave a basket, how to cut a pair of trousers, how to make clay tiles, how to make things out of silver. You look at what you’re doing, you look at your raw materials, and then you do what you’ve learned. And if the results don’t come out well, you don’t just stop and give up. You try again. You try to be very careful to notice what you’re doing and try to develop your range of skills as to what you might do with that kind of raw material. You can see this in the meditation. You can see what state your mind is in. And sometimes it settles down with the breath. You can learn an awful lot about the mind as you get the breath energies to move in the body. Sometimes the mind is not willing to settle down with the breath. It’s got other issues. You’ve got to deal with those. That’s one of the reasons why the Buddha didn’t teach just one meditation technique. He taught the six recollections, in some cases ten recollections. He was recollecting the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Think about their virtues, how inspiring they are. Think about the Sangha, the monks and the nuns, who had all kinds of difficulties, but they were able to overcome them. In his case, they overcame them through their own efforts. He looked at what position they were in, what state they were in, and said, “Something’s wrong here. I’ve got to do something about it.” In a way, you might say they were self-starters. Think about Ajahn Mun. We had Ajahn Tso to inspire him. But who inspired Ajahn Tso? The idea that the son of a peasant could actually gain awakening. There was something inside him that said, “I’ve got to be able to do this. I’m in a miserable situation. I’ve got to find a way out.” And you read the life stories of all the different Ajahns. It’s the same sort of thing. John Foong talked about how he reflected when he was a teenager and was beginning to hear the lessons of the Dhamma. He’d been a temple boy ever since he was eleven. And we think about temple boys being very religious. Well, that’s not the way they are in Thailand. They tend to be some of the hardiest criminals you can imagine. He told me about the time he’d taken some goods in illegally from a ship that was out on the sea. That was the kind of education he was getting as a temple boy. But then when he turned around sixteen or seventeen, he began to reflect on himself. Here he was, orphaned, didn’t have any skills, didn’t have much knowledge. What hope was there for him? He realized that the only way out of that was to get some good karma. So he actually started thinking about getting ordained. Then he was discouraged. When he did get ordained, he saw that the monastery was staying, was not following the Vinaya very carefully. He was pretty despairing. But then his second year as a monk, he had decided that if by the second year he couldn’t find anything better, he was going to disrobe. By the second year, he met a John Lee. And this inspired him. So he started thinking about spending his days meditating. In the evening, he’d go and listen to a John Lee giving Dhamma talks. He realized that there was not going to be an easy path. But what else was there? So you read about people like this. Use it again as a sense of inspiration. Sometimes we read the biographies of the Ajahns, and it sounds almost as if they came out of the womb already, Arhats. But that’s not the case. And it wasn’t easy for them to practice, especially back in those days when the traditions of the forest monasteries as we know them now had not been established, and they had to buck a lot of Thai culture. It was because they were determined to contemplate these things, to give themselves some determination. You can contemplate your own virtue, your own generosity, as a way of reminding yourself that you do have some good to you. And the kind of practice we’re doing here builds on those qualities, builds on good things. It’s not just a matter of figuring things out, but also a matter of nurturing good qualities in the mind. The same with recollection of the devas. It may sound like an odd topic to be thinking about, but the Buddha has you reflect, “What is it that makes a person a deva?” And then you reflect on the fact that you’ve got some of those qualities yourself. It also gives you an idea of where you might be lacking and can do something about it. The qualities are conviction. You really believe that the Buddha gained awakening. And what he proved in his awakening was that ultimate happiness was something that human beings can find. The other qualities are having virtue, generosity, learning the Dhamma, and then discernment, what they call penetrating discernment into arising and passing away. The important word there is “penetrating.” In other words, you don’t just see things coming and going. Penetrating means you see what they’re caused by and which things, when they arise, are actually good for you. And which things are not, which have good long-term consequences, and which don’t. And then you act accordingly. A lot of the wisdom is in the acting accordingly. We tend to think of wisdom as being a quality where you can figure things out, you have the right attitude. But an important part of the right attitude is that you realize that this is a teaching that you have to put into practice. It’s written all over the teachings. The Noble Truths have their duties. When the Buddha talks about skillful qualities, they’re to be developed. Unskillful qualities are to be abandoned. That’s why right resolve is part of the wisdom part of the path, the discernment part of the path. So you reflect on these things. If the mind doesn’t settle down with the breath, as the Buddha said, give it something inspiring to think about. Have that in your bag of tools. See what it is that allows the mind to settle down with a sense of, as I say in Thay, of being cool. In other words, you feel at ease. You’re not stirred up. But then, as John Lee warns you, don’t be so cool that you just sit there. Be ready to do your work. Because it is work that we have to do. In Thay, one of the idioms for meditating is “making an effort.” And a lot of us in America don’t like to hear that. We think that efforting is going to be bad for the practice. You can even hear some Western teachers that have been trained in the Thay forest tradition telling you that if you put in too much effort, it’s going to be bad for you. Where they learned that, I don’t know. But the effort is not necessarily that you have to wear yourself out physically. It’s more being really careful in looking at your mind, being really careful in looking at what you’re doing, and trying to do your best. And then see what the results are. That’s how you learn. If you don’t try to do your best, then the results aren’t going to teach you all that much. So you take responsibility. You approach this as an adult, this question of suffering. Because you realize, ultimately, that you’re the one who’s causing it. So you’re the one who’s got to learn how to stop causing it. So you have to take responsibility. You have to look very carefully at your actions and their results. But this is how we grow. We do our best. And the Buddha says you’ve got to be committed to reflect. The commitment means doing your best. If things aren’t going well, search through your memory of what you’ve learned. See what you can apply. That’s why we develop mindfulness. Not just to be aware of things coming and going, but to remember certain things work, certain things don’t work. Certain things work in certain circumstances and are good for certain circumstances, but not for others. And you remember that. Then you can apply that knowledge. And if you apply it and it doesn’t get results, then you’re going to learn what to do, some more things. But it’s your determination to put an end to suffering that’s going to see you through. In Chan Mun, when he would give examples, he would sometimes compare the practice to being a soldier in the battle. Your weapons are your discernment. Your supplies are your mindfulness and your concentration. And the question is, who is the soldier? The soldier, he said, is the determination not to come back and be the laughingstock of the defilements ever again. It’s a really interesting image. So think about it. See how it applies to you.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2023/231028_Practice_Like_an_Adult.mp3>