Surprise Yourself

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It’s possible to focus on the breath and not learn much of anything. One of John Lee’s friends, who was also a student of John Munn, complained one time, “Why do you teach people to focus on the breath? All there is is in and out, in and out.” And as John Lee said, “Well, if that’s all you can see, that’s all there is.” The implication being that the problem is not with the breath, it’s with the way you look at it. Buddha says that one of the qualities you want to look at in yourself as a meditator is your ingenuity. He doesn’t explain it much. It’s one of those terms that’s very rarely mentioned in the Canon, but then it becomes an important thing to know about. Which means that you have to be ingenious in how you interpret that. I stand with John Foyle. The two things he said you have to develop most in your meditation are, one, your powers of observation, and two, your ingenuity. You have a clear idea of what you want here. You want to get the mind to settle down with a sense of well-being. But then you run into obstacles, and some of the obstacles are things you didn’t expect. Look at the Buddhist instructions on breath meditation. They’re just 16 steps. It’s not much to go on. You have to fill in the blanks. We’re practicing mindfulness of breathing to get the mind into concentration. That much is clear. The 16 steps fall into four tetrads. One tetrad deals with the body, one with feelings, one with the mind, and one with dhammas. In other words, they deal with the frames of reference that we use to establish mindfulness. The question is, do you follow them 1 through 16? The way the Buddha describes how they lead to mindfulness practice, or embody mindfulness practice, suggests that you could focus on any one tetrad, like the first one. You discern when the breath is long. You discern when the breath is short. You breathe in and out sensitive to the entire body. You breathe in and out calming bodily fabrication. The word bodily fabrication there means basically the in-and-out breath. The question, of course, is why would the Buddha use a technical term there? And the answer is, he wants you to think in terms of fabrication. He’s trying to direct your ingenuity. To what extent is the breath a fabricated process? Fabrication here means that you’re working with intention. To what extent is the breath intentional? It is one of the processes in the body that can either be automatic or intentional. The question is how much of the automatic side of it really is automatic. How much of it has become subconscious in the way you direct it? One way to learn about that is to try to adjust the breath. Find a way of breathing that feels good. The Buddha himself suggests this in one of his analogies. You’re a cook. You’re working for a king or a king’s minister. People who are not easy to please. And so you prepare all different kinds of dishes and see what the king or the king’s minister likes. Now the king may say that he likes this or likes that, but he may not say anything. In which case you have to look, well, where does he reach for? What does he take more of? Then you provide more of that. When you do it, you satisfy the king, then you’re going to get a reward. In the same way as a meditator, you want to find something that the mind likes. Which means you have to experiment. You can try long breathing, short breathing, fast, slow. See what the body likes. And John Lee uses his ingenuity, shows his ingenuity, by expanding on the analogy. So not only have to please the king, but you also have to change what you make. Because it’s not the case that the king is going to want the same thing day in and day out. So there are days when long breathing feels good, and other days when it’s not so interesting anymore. Well, you have to change. Vary your offerings. That’s when you get a reward. When the breath feels good, what do you do with it? There’s another scripture where the Buddha says that you take whatever sense of ease or well-being that comes as the mind begins to settle down, and you work it through the body. The same way that a bathman would work water through a ball of bath powder. Back in those days they didn’t have soap. They had a kind of powder that you would make into a dough by the way you mixed it with water. So how do you do that? How do you work the ease through the body? How do you need the ease through the body? Well, John Lee talks about the breath energies in different parts of the body. The flow along the nerves, flow along the blood vessels. When you think of that property of the wind element, and the inner breath is also property of the wind element, you work the two of them together. There’s nothing in the Canada that says to do this. But it’s a solution to the problem posed by the fact that the Buddha doesn’t explain everything. So what way of working with the energies in the body will work for you? How do you perceive the energies in your body? The common problem is that when the mind begins to settle down, there’s a feeling of like a band of tension around the head, or centered between the eyes. And often it seems pretty resistant to any way of breathing around it, or breathing through it. The question is, how do you perceive it as you breathe through it? Do you think that it’s got a surface that you’ve got to push? And when you’re breathing through, where are you breathing from and where are you breathing to? Maybe that’s aggravating the tension. I’ve personally found that if it’s good to imagine that band of tension not as a band, but just as kind of a cloud. And with all clouds there’s no clear surface. And there’s a lot of space between the water droplets. Let that space do the breathing. In other words, you don’t let the tension do the breathing, you let that space inside the tension do the breathing. And you’re breathing into the tension from all directions. It changes the way you feel that tension in the head. It becomes more of just a heaviness. And you think about the fact that when you’re sitting here and the mind gets calm, the areas of the head that tend to get tensed back and forth, back and forth, tensed and released, and released as you think, suddenly they’re released entirely. And so, of course, the blood is going to flow into those areas. If you push the blood around, of course, you’re going to get headaches. So don’t think of blood, don’t think of surfaces, don’t think of bands. You can think of a knife cutting through the bands. It’s all just little pieces. And each little piece is breathing in and breathing out. It’s breathing for its own sake. You’re not trying to push the breath through to get to someplace else. What does that do? In other words, you play with your perceptions. That’s how ingenuity works. First you’ve got to alert yourself to what your perceptions are, and then you challenge them. And then think of alternatives. And the easiest ways to think of alternatives, of course, is to ask yourself the opposite. If the breath is going in, and it seems to be going in one direction, what if it’s actually going in another direction? Or if you can just think of it going in another direction, what happens? Learn to play with things like this. Then you’ll see the extent to which your perceptions actually shape what you experience, and how they don’t have to be written in stone. They can be changed. Because that’s what the Buddhist teachings all come down to, is the fact that you can change things, if you can change things right now. He said the path to the end of suffering would be impossible. But the fact that things are not totally shaped by the past gives you some leeway right now. To make a difference. So play with that. Ask questions that you didn’t ask before. Try to answer perceptions that you didn’t use before. We borrow the perceptions we get from the Buddha, from the Ajahns. And if they don’t work for us, we don’t say that they were bad, simply that they were not quite the solution to the problem that we have. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha’s instructions on breath meditation are so sketchy. We have to learn how to fill in the blanks. And the way you fill in the blanks, and the way somebody else fills in the blanks, may not get the same results, even if you do the same things. So you have to make adjustments. You have to fill in. So, just as John Lee recommended ingenuity and also showed ingenuity in how he played with the Buddhist teachings, you should learn to show some ingenuity to yourself. Surprise yourself with the questions you ask. You may get some surprisingly useful answers. After all, if the insight were something you could anticipate, it would be something you could read in a book, and that would be the end of the problem. But the insight that’s going to work for one person may not have the same effect for another person. Because where you’ve created your own problems, and the way you’ve created your own problems, you create suffering. Again, the Buddha talks in large terms. You have to get down to the specifics if you really want his teachings to work. Which means that the Buddha doesn’t do all the lifting for you. You have to do the lifting yourself. I had a student one time who wanted to have the path laid out for him ahead of time and just be told what to do, so he could follow instructions and do it. He got frustrated when I told him, “Well, try this. Try that. See what works.” After his fifth year here, he went to Thailand. He found out that that’s how the Ajahns over there taught as well. There’s no one insight technique that’s going to work for everybody. No one penetrating question is going to penetrate your particular defilements, your particular misunderstandings. You’ve created your misunderstandings, and now you’re going to have to use your ingenuity to take them apart. There are certain general principles that work, but a lot of it lies in the details, the specifics. That’s where you have to use your ingenuity. That’s where you have to play.

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