When You Practice on Your Own

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When I was in France, the question was posed, “When you’re practicing on your own, how do you know what level of practice is appropriate for you?” This is asked by someone who had been trained in one of those traditions where there are very clearly delineated practices as being elementary practices, intermediate practices, advanced practices, and it was dangerous to take on the advanced practices before you had completed the earlier ones. I told him, “Our tradition is not like that. Ours is, you start with the basics, and you really get good at the basics, and as you get good at them, they develop on their own, without you having to decide that they’re going to go from one level to the next. As a Buddhist, you start out with virtue, and you really get into virtue. You learn about your mind by observing the precepts. You develop more mindfulness, more alertness, more ardency, and those qualities turn into the practice of right mindfulness. As you practice right mindfulness, the mindfulness gets good and develops into the practice for awakening, as mindfulness settles in, gets established, turns into concentration practice. As you get really good at concentration practice, you start getting insights into what you’re doing. Take breath meditation for example. You start out focusing on the breath, and as you’re focusing on the breath, you can’t help but notice how the breath has an impact on feelings, and how the fact that you’re alert to the breath influences what feelings you have in the body, how you can develop them. That gives you some insight into the process of fabrication. You see that feelings are not just givens. There’s a lot of intentional activity going into how you focus on a feeling, what you do with it. And as you learn how to deal skillfully with the feelings, you get more and more insights into the mind as the mind is settling down. At the same time, you’re making sure that the mind doesn’t wander off to other things. And you begin to notice, what does it mean to”wander off” to other things? What happens? And you begin to see the process of becoming as a thought-world. The thought-world appears, and you decide whether to go into it or not. If you go into it, that becomes a state of birth and becoming. And you learn how not to fall for those things. You begin to learn the stages, the steps that lead up to that. All of this leads to deepened, deepened, deepened insight. Learn how to do something very basic, and simple, but being really observant about how you do it. So in this sense, the path is the same for everybody. It’s just a question of how observant you are, how patient you are. But the path is all the same. There’s that question that was posed to the Buddha one time about how many people were going to get an awakening. Was it the whole world, or half the world, or a third? The answer. The Brahmin who asked the question was getting upset. A nun who was concerned that here he is, the Brahmin is asking an important question, and the Buddha just stays silent. So he took him aside, and he gave him an analogy. It’s like there’s a fortress that has a single gate, and there’s the experienced gatekeeper who walks around the fortress, checking the walls, and doesn’t see a hole even big enough for a cat to slip in. So he comes back to the gate, and what he’s learned is this. He hasn’t learned how many people are going to come in and out of the fortress, but he has learned that everybody who’s going to go in and out of the fortress has to go through the gate. The same way the Buddha has seen that everyone starts with the practice of virtue, and it develops into mindfulness, the factors for awakening. And then release. That’s the pattern for everybody. Even though there’s a standard pattern for all of us, the way each person follows the path is going to depend on his or her background. In other words, what you bring to the practice is going to determine whether it goes quickly or slowly, whether it’s going to be pleasant or not pleasant. You see, this is the way the Buddha taught. A horse trainer came to him one time. The Buddha asked him, “How do you train your horses?” The horse trainer said, “Well, there are those I treat gently, and they’re easy to train. There are those I have to treat harshly before they finally submit. Some will respond to a combination of gentle and harsh treatment, and some don’t respond at all. Those,” he says, “I kill to maintain my reputation as a good horse trainer.” The Buddha said, “Well, it’s the same with him. Those he would teach in a gentle way, those he would teach in a harsh way, those he would teach in a combination of gentle and harsh, those he would kill.” The horse trainer was surprised. “How can you kill anybody? You’re the Buddha.” The Buddha said, “Well, what that means is I just don’t teach them.” Which is the same as killing them. But notice, the Buddha had to develop different styles of teaching. In some cases, his gentle teaching, he’d start with what’s called the graduated discourse. He’d start talking about generosity, acts of giving, virtue. Then he’d talk about heaven as a place where generosity and virtue are rewarded. But those central levels of heaven, he would go on to say, have their drawbacks. So if you’re listening to the Dhamma, and you’ve been practicing generosity and you’ve been practicing virtue, you feel good about what he’s saying, you get to go to heaven. Then he talks about the drawbacks. From that context, you’ve gladdened your mind, softened up the mind, as the Buddha said. Then you’d be ready to say, “Well, maybe I could go for something better.” That’s what he would teach, how sensuality has its drawbacks. You’d learn to see renunciation as rest, as something positive. Renunciation here doesn’t mean you just give up things. It means you look for your pleasures in a place aside from sensuality. In other words, in the practice of concentration. So you settle the mind in with the sense of the body, once you feel it from within. The sense of ease, the sense of well-being. From there, you contemplate the Four Noble Truths. Many times, people listening to the Dhamma in this way would gain their first taste of awakening. There are other people, though, that the Buddha would treat more harshly. There’s a case where he was walking with a group of monks, there was a huge bonfire by the side of the road. So they went down from the road, sat down by a tree near the bonfire. So the monks followed him down. And they asked him, “Which is better, embracing that fire over there, or embracing a pretty woman?” And the monk said, “Of course, embracing a pretty woman is much better.” And the Buddha said, “For an immoral monk, it would be better if he embraced the fire.” “Why is that?” “Because embracing the woman would take him down to hell, whereas embracing the fire would not.” Then he went on to talk about accepting gifts. If you’re an immoral monk, accepting gifts is… Accepting salutations, you know, when people place their hands palm to palm over the heart. “Which would be better, receiving that kind of salutation, or getting stabbed in the chest with an iron spike?” And again, the monk said, “Ah, the salutation would be better.” And the Buddha said, “If you’re an immoral monk, you’d be better off getting that spike in your heart.” It goes on in this way. And the images get stronger and stronger. And at the end of the talk, a large number of monks coughed up hot blood. Another number of monks left the training. They’d been fully awakened. After being chastised like that, they said that the only course of action left open to them was to train their minds, right then and there. So that’s a case where people responded to harsh treatment. There’s another case where thirty monks came to see the Buddha. And he asked them, “Which do you think is greater, the water in all the oceans or the blood that you’ve lost by having your throat slit open?” It turns out that the blood was more than the water in the oceans. It goes down about all the different reasons you might have for having your throat slit open over the many, many lifetimes you’ve experienced, either because you were a sheep, or you were a goat, or you were a cow, or you were a thief. The monk said, “A really strong sense of sanghvega.” A strong sense of being chastened. And they all became fully awakened. What this means is that you come to the practice with a background. And you don’t know what that background is. And so you follow the path. Sometimes you find that it’s easy and fast. Sometimes you find that it’s easy and slow. Sometimes it’s hard and fast, or hard and slow. You can’t order them as you would order things off a menu. Saying, “I’ll have an easy path. I’ll be okay with slow, as long as it’s easy, and I’ll take a side of fries.” The path you follow, even though there is a standard pattern, has its variations which depend on your background. So in some cases you can take a pleasant theme of meditation, like the breath. Sometimes you have to focus on the contemplation of the body. Especially if you have strong lust, you’ve got to spend a lot of time thinking about what’s really unattractive about the body. That’s one kind of painful practice. There are other painful practices which involve the ascetic practices. And again, the Buddha says some people don’t need them, some people do. He didn’t have a doctrinary attitude towards asceticism. There are some extreme ascetic practices that he didn’t recommend. But others, like taking one meal a day, accepting only the food that you get on your alms round, living out in the open, living under a tree. These things, the Buddha said, work for some people and not for other people. So it’s good to give them a try to see if you’re the kind of person who responds to that kind of training. Then there are the people who find discernment easy and concentration hard. Those who find concentration easy but discernment hard. In cases like that, the Buddha would have you work on developing the area where you find it hard. This goes against the grain with a lot of people. People tend to be very intellectual and find it easy to think things through, to analyze things. They just want to keep on doing that. They like being told that they don’t have to get their mind really quiet, that they can think their way to Nirvana without realizing that they haven’t touched the pride that goes through their thinking at all. Other people just want to be very quiet. The attitude is, “Don’t disturb me. Let me just be quiet, quiet, quiet. I don’t want to have to think. I don’t want to have to deal with difficult things.” Well, that’s laziness. You have to look at yourself. If you’re the kind of person who, as the Chan Fung said, thinks too much, you’ve got to work on the stillness of your mind. It may take time to get the mind still. But once you’ve gotten it quieted down, you’ve learned some important lessons. People who find concentration easy don’t learn those lessons. So in the days when, for some reason, it’s hard, they don’t know what to do. But if you had experience dealing with a mind that’s taken over by thoughts of your work, thoughts of your family, sensual thoughts, thoughts of ill will or anger, and learn how to get the mind past those hindrances, then when they come up again, you know how to deal with them again. The problem is that you might get bored. You get bored with the fact that progress is slow. Or then when you do succeed in getting the mind still, you get bored with the stillness. You have to realize that even in the stillness, some interesting things are happening. As you maintain that stillness, you begin to see thoughts of distractions as they appear. And again, you’ll see the steps by which they appear. The first one you’ve got to deal with is those thoughts of boredom. Who’s bored? Why? What reason do they give for being bored? Why do they need to be entertained? Why do you have to believe those thoughts? Why do you have to identify with them? If you look into those questions, there’s a lot to learn. As for the people who are attached to their stillness, find stillness easy and don’t want to be bothered, they’ve got to learn how to think. Because the stillness is not reliable. It’s like hiding out. You can hide out only for so long. You have to come back out again. The affairs of the world disturb you. It’s not the fault of the world, it’s the fault of your own mind. Other people make you angry. It’s not necessarily their fault. Why do you find it so easy to get angry at other people? Why can’t you overcome that anger? Again, why do you believe the anger? Why do you identify with it? Face these questions. Face them. You can’t just run away, run away, run away. Because the fault is inside you. If you don’t see that fault inside you, your meditation is blind. So the lesson here is that you’ve got to learn how to read yourself, just like that image of the cook. The cook has to notice what his boss, who’s the king, likes. The king may not say, but the king expects that you be observant. You provide him with what he needs. Here the case is that you’re not just providing the mind with what it likes. Sometimes you have to give it lessons that it doesn’t like. This is all part of being your own teacher. Again, this is what it’s involved in, meditating on your own. Even when you’ve got a teacher around, the teacher can’t be with you 24/7. You’ve got to learn how to internalize the principles of a good teacher, who learns how to recognize what your strengths are, what your weaknesses are, how you can use your strengths in order to work on your weaknesses. So you can bring your practice into balance. This is what it means to be observant as you practice. And it’s the ability to observe that takes those basic practices and can make them advanced. And John Lee used to say, “Watch out for the attitude that says some practices are lowly and basic, and other practices are high.” Because you’re not going to get to the high practices until you get really good at the basics. And it’s your ability to observe and to accept lessons that you may not like to accept, but are good for you. That’s how your practice becomes advanced.

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