The Joy of Growing

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As the Buddha says, one of the skills that you develop as a meditator is learning how to think the thoughts you want to think and not think the thoughts you don’t want to think. In other words, you have to be able to step back from your thinking and pass judgment on it as to what’s worth thinking and what’s not. Now, a lot of people don’t like to be judged. They’ve been subjected to some pretty harsh and useless judgments. But that doesn’t mean that judgment is bad. It just means that there’s skillful judgment and unskillful judgment. And you want to train yourself so that your inner commentator becomes a helpful part of the path. Because after all, we come here to grow, we come here to change, to increase our level of skill. That requires that we have a very objective and matter-of-fact way of looking at our actions. To admit the “Yes, we have made a mistake.” Because if you don’t recognize your mistakes and admit them, there’s no way you’re going to grow. Skill comes from understanding a mistake, seeing that you harmed yourself, you harmed others, and trying to figure out how not to do that. Realizing that the harm is unnecessary. Although sometimes the word “harm” may be a little bit too strong. Like right now, you’re trying to get the mind to settle. There are thoughts that are going to get in the way. And you have to say with a very firm attitude, “No, we’re not going there. We’re going to stay with the breath.” That requires that you be strict with any thoughts, as the Buddha said, dealing with greed and distress with reverence to the world. And say “Yes” to the thoughts that will bring you to the breath. If you find yourself slipping off, you have to come back as quickly as you can. And be extra vigilant to see why was it that the mind was able to slip off. You made the intention to stay with the breath. What happened? And you say, “Well, I forgot.” And if you leave it at that, then you haven’t learned anything. You have to figure out why. What part of the mind wanted to forget? Wanted to go out and travel around? Because you’re dealing with a lot of minds in here, a lot of voices. We’re talking about training the mind. It’s more like training the minds. And you have to be strict with anything that wanders away. And you have to encourage the thoughts that would like to stay. And use your ingenuity in staying. The Buddha talks about breathing in ways that are sensitive to rapture, sensitive to pleasure. He says, “Once there is a sense of rapture or pleasure, you let it spread around the body.” At that point, there’s no part of the body at all that’s not saturated with rapture and pleasure. And where are you going to find that? The Buddha simply says there’s a potential. He recommends that you bring the mind in a good mood to the meditation. Think about the ways in which you’ve been generous. Think about the ways in which you’ve held to the precepts. Think in any way that helps you feel confident that you’re doing something good. here and that you’re capable of doing it. But that attitude has to be confirmed as you get the mind to settle down. This is why John Lee’s instructions are so helpful. He talks about the breath energy in the body and ways you can manipulate the breath. In long, out long. In short, out short. In long, out short. In short, out long. Heavy in light. Fast, slow. Deep or shallow. Broad or narrow. There’s a lot to play with here. And as you play with the breath, it makes it more interesting. You can simply in, out, in, out. It gets pretty dull after a while. And the mind’s going to find an excuse to slip away. But if you pose some questions in the mind, and then try to answer them by being observant, that makes it a lot more interesting. It engages you. So you’ve got to use some techniques. You’ve got to use some strategies to get the mind to want to stay. And over time you find that what works for you. We start with the John Lee’s instructions on where to start with the breath in the back of the neck, down the spine, down the shoulders, down the arms. But after a while you can get a better sense of what works for you. Some people find that starting at the navel is easier because of the breath energy. The movement of the body there is easier to observe. So you start there. The important thing is that you work through the whole body, loosening up any patterns of tension, any sense of blockage. So the breath energy can flow freely. And when the breath energy can flow freely, then when a sense of pleasure comes into the breath, it’ll flow along with it. Sense of fullness. So that’s one of the ways of translating bhitti, that we usually translate as rupture. You can translate it as fullness. Sense of fullness can move through the body. And then you learn how to maintain that. Allow the body to find some pleasure in the breath. Pleasure in being still. Because usually it finds its pleasure in running around, looking for variety, looking for new things to think about. But we’re going to make it think about one thing. After all, you want to get it so that it thinks about the things you want to think about, and doesn’t think about the things you don’t want to think about. So you develop your attitude as to what you want to think about, based on what you’ve noticed, based on what you’ve observed. Certain thinking may be fun for a while, but it leaves you like potato chips. You enjoy eating them for a while, but they don’t really satisfy your hunger. And after a while you’ve had a lot of them and you feel sick. So notice that. That kind of thinking was enjoyable for a while, but I’ve got to stay away. And you learn how to recognize it the next time it comes. Say, “I went for it one time, but not now.” And then you learn how to stick with that determination. Having a sense of well-being with the breath helps. Because you’re not so hungry for the other kind of thinking. But the important thing is that your powers of observation get sharper, and your powers of judgment get more discriminating. In other words, you see that what you thought was okay before is not really okay anymore. This is how you grow. And there’s a joy in growing. When it comes to this ability to pass judgment wisely on what you’re doing. As the Buddha said, he got onto the path when he decided to divide his thoughts into two types. Those based on sensuality, ill-will, harmfulness, on one side. Those based on renunciation, non-ill-will, harmlessness, on the other side. In other words, he judged his thoughts as to where they came from and where they were going to lead. The ones in the first sort would lead to harm for himself or others. And the second sort would lead away from harm. Now the question of whether he liked that particular type of thinking or not did not enter into it. He looked at the results. He was looking more for the long term. That was the basis on which he was judging things. And he had this ability to step back. That’s how we get on the path too. Not just siding with our thoughts, or what we like in the moment. What we think about, observe. Which parts of the mind are responsible for different kinds of thinking? Which ones lead to different kinds of thinking? And what are the results? It’s when you can pass judgment like this. That’s when you can get on the path. Because it’s not simply a matter of following instructions. You have to think as well. You have to observe for yourself. This is how the Buddha found the Dhamma. This is how we’re going to find it too. And that’s the advantage that he came before us and pointed out where the good questions are. But it’s up to us to ask those questions of ourselves right here and right now. And to raise our standards, to be in line with his standards. You read his autobiographical accounts of how he pursued awakening. And he seems pretty superhuman, but he was extremely determined. And very scrupulous. And that’s what’s going to be demanded of us. John Lee talks about how he looked back on his practice and he was amazed that he could do what he did. That’s the kind of practice you want to have. That you stretch yourself, that you grow, that you develop strength, that you didn’t have before. Strengths of endurance, stronger mindfulness, stronger concentration. It’s all about developing and growing and finding joy in developing and growing. You’ve got to figure things out. The Buddha gives you the outline and you’ve got to figure out how the outline applies to the particulars of your mind. The particulars of your breath, your body as you experience it right now. So basically the Buddha’s asking that we become adult. We become mature, we grow up. Among the world religions, Buddhism seems to be unique in that it expects us to be adults. We’re not told to simply obey. We’re not told to place our hopes in somebody else doing all the work for us. We’ve got to do the work. We’ve got to be responsible. But there’s a joy in being mature. Because it comes from your ability to learn new things, do things that are hard. But learn that you’ve got the capability within you to do those things. This is why the path is good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end. Because it builds on good qualities you already have and makes them stronger and stronger. As you learn that there may be good in potential, but they’re not good enough. The Buddha’s attitude that he said you should have developed is that you take pride in the fact that you’ve done something right, but then you use that as encouragement to do it better the next time. This is how we grow. So it’s good to find joy in learning how to grow. Because you stretch yourself and you find that you are capable of more than you might have expected. I mean, who would look at that young prince in India? Who, looking at that young prince in India 2,600 years ago, would have thought that he could become the Buddha? He saw potentials within himself. And nobody else saw. He realized that all human beings have those potentials. Not to become Buddha, maybe. But to put it into your suffering. To grow. He said if people couldn’t develop skillful qualities and abandon unskillful ones, he wouldn’t have bothered to teach. But it’s because we have this ability to learn and to grow. Learn from our mistakes. That’s why the Dharma is for us. So make the most of it.

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