The Heart of the Path

May, 2001

The Buddha once said that the heart of the path is concentration. Of course, the path has eight factors, but the other seven factors, he says, are supports for the right concentration. They help keep it balanced. They help keep it in line. But the concentration itself is the heart. So that’s what we work on as we practice meditation. In Thailand, when they say they’re going to go meditate, they usually say they’re going to go practice concentration, do concentration. And it is something you do. It’s not something where you just sort of drop everything and get still. I mean, there are some people who do it that way. But that kind of concentration often lacks the other factors that are needed in the path. We need mindfulness, right mindfulness. We need right effort in order to keep things balanced. Basically, there are two qualities we’re working on here as we bring the mind in concentration. One is tranquility, and the other is insight. The tranquility is the process of bringing the mind to a state of oneness, a state of unification, a state of steadiness, stillness. The insight is more a process of investigating, trying to come to an understanding, asking questions about what’s going on. You need the two of them to work in tandem. They’re asking to be a balance between the two. Now, if you’ve ever looked at an old-fashioned balance, you may realize that it doesn’t mean that they have to be both perfectly equal at all times. Old balances would swing back and forth before they come to a proper balance. And this is what the balance in concentration practice is like. Sometimes you have to do a little more investigation. Sometimes you have to emphasize the stillness more. But you want both qualities in that state of mind. Because if it’s just thinking and just investigating, then it’s easy to go off just into abstraction, which doesn’t make an impact on the mind. If it’s just stillness, many times the mind can just kind of blank out. In either case, you’re not getting the mind in the proper state it needs to be in, both active and still at the same time, like a battery. The battery is still, but it has power. That’s the kind of quality you want in your meditation. So you look at your state of mind. This is the investigation. Where are you right now as you’re beginning your concentration? Is the mind leading towards laziness? Is it more restless? What do you need to do in order to balance it out? Because if the mind is getting lazy, you have to poke at it with questions. Where should it be right now? What qualities should it have right now? What is it lacking right now? Wake it up a little bit. If it’s more restless, what can you do to calm it down, to drop all of its restless thoughts, and also to work out that kind of restless energy that lies behind the thoughts? It’s the investigation quality that looks into the situation and sets course for you. Once you’ve got your course set, then you stick with it. If the mind is really way out of line, then you just want to stress as much stillness as possible, like we were talking earlier today about fear. Fear just overcomes you. You’ve got to say, “I’m out of here. I’m out of this fear.” You have to have confidence in the concentration, especially when it’s a physically dangerous place like a forest. When the mind is concentrated, there’s kind of an energy to a concentrated mind that will give you protection. If anything bad does come, you want to be in a good concentrated state of mind when the time comes to go. Either way, this is where you want to be. That means you’re going to have to learn how to let go of a lot of attachments. You might not let go permanently, but for the time being, who cares about the body? Who cares about things outside? You’re just going to focus right in here, and you latch on to the breath. Hold on to the breath, and don’t let anything else come in. That’s when the element of balance tips over a little bit in order to compensate for an imbalance in the mind. Once you’ve developed that sort of foundation for yourself, that sense of safety for yourself, then you can start coming out and looking at the fear again, this time from a different perspective. This is where the investigation comes in. The mind is still centered. It’s still in the present moment, but it’s giving just enough room for the fear to come back in a little bit. So you can watch it and see, “Where is this coming from? Exactly what is feeling threatened?” Of course, sometimes it’s very obvious what’s feeling threatened. The question is, “Why do I have to identify with that? One, why do I have to identify with the thing that’s being threatened? Two, why do I have to identify with the fear? What is there in the fear that’s so compelling?” Ask it in such a way that you wonder, “Why on earth would anybody want to fear?” Of course, the mind will come up with all kinds of reasons. Well, listen to what it has to say. This is one part in the practice where the investigation begins to get stronger. So you go back and forth. Like the old-fashioned balance, it tips a little bit this way sometimes, a little bit that way sometimes. But what it’s doing is approaching balance, just depending on what’s needed for that particular time and place. This is what right effort is all about. It’s not a medium effort or a mediocre effort. It means an effort that’s appropriate for the time. Sometimes, when things come up in the mind, you can’t figure out what to do with them. Well, just sit and watch for a while. And if sitting and watching doesn’t help at all, okay, just get very quiet. Let the mind focus down. Other times, you need to take a more proactive stance in trying to understand and probe. And it’s mindfulness that watches over all of this to see precisely what needs to be done, what’s giving results, what’s not giving results. This ability to refer to what’s going on, to monitor the results of your practice, is a very important part of the practice. You’ve got to keep tabs on what’s happening, what the results of your practice are. Otherwise, it just goes running off into one direction or another without anything to break it, put brakes on it. That kind of meditation is not safe at all. You want to look into how things are going in the mind. Sometimes it’s just posing the question a bit. Putting a little question mark in your mind and then leaving it there for a while and seeing what comes up. Other times, you have to ask more specifically, ask more aggressively. All this is the quality of skillfulness, which takes time and powers of observation to develop. As this process of meditation, even though there are books and manuals and steps one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, all written out, when you actually sit down, the mind doesn’t necessarily follow what’s going on in the books. This is where you have to learn how to use your own powers of ingenuity in order to make adjustments that are just right for your state of mind right here, right now. It’s your ability to get beyond that. It’s like the difference between a cook who always has to have a recipe around and a cook who can walk into a kitchen, see what’s there, and make a good dish out of it. You need that crutch to begin with. But after all, you want to have your own intuitive sense that comes from experience, that comes from monitoring what works and what doesn’t work in your mind. This way, whatever issue comes up—attachment, anger, fear, greed, lust—you don’t have to get taken up by it. And you have a whole slew of approaches to use with it, because when these things come, they don’t always come in the same form. They don’t always come with the same strength, and they don’t always hit you when you have the same strength of mind. So you have to learn how to put yourself in the best possible position, which may not necessarily be the ideal position for dealing with those things yet. Try to find out what works best right now. Do I need more concentration and tranquility? Do I need more insight, more clarity? Do I need more questioning and probing? And if nothing seems to work, we’ll just sit there and go back into the concentration. Be with that sense of knowing in the present moment, without trying to figure anything out, without anything else. Just be right there. Let things sort of settle down in the mind until they do become clear. Until your probing starts to work again. Then it’s back and forth like this, over that point of balance, trying to find that point of balance when the concentration and the insight and the mindfulness and all the factors of the path come together in a way that’s just right. That’s when the path takes over in the mind. But to get there, you have to do a lot of the work. Concentration is not just sort of turning out the lights and just being very still. It’s a combination of tranquility and insight working together to bring the mind to the most ideal state for right here, right now. And it takes time and it takes effort, but it’s time and effort that are well worth devoting to this, because otherwise the mind is going to be totally out of control. Totally without protection. So, be observant. That’s perhaps of all the instructions that Jon Frohn used to give. Number one was be observant. Number two was use your ingenuity. When you’ve got those two factors going together, again, the meditation is sure to progress. It’s sure to become more and more your refuge. More and more a skill, something you can depend upon. It becomes your refuge.

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